ROXBURGHSHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

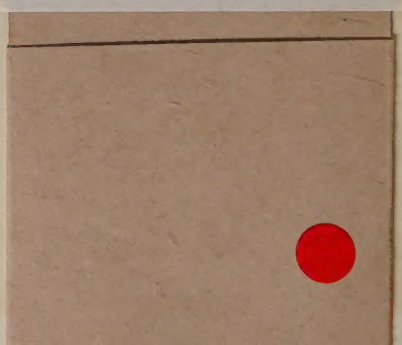
COUNTY LIBRARY

Readers are requested to take great care of the books while in their possesion. If a book is found to be damaged on its return to the Library, the Reader in whose name it was issued will make good such damage.

All books should be returned to the Library within fourteen days from the date of issue; but an extension of the period of loan may be granted. A fine of Twopence may be charged for every week or part of a week a book is kept beyond that period.

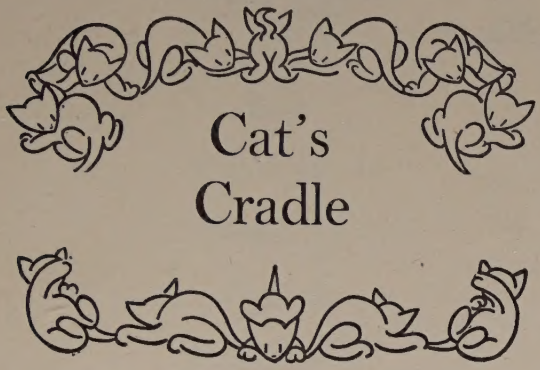
Students using the County Library are reminded that the special resources of the Scottish Central Library are available to them. Applications for service from the Central Library should be accompanied by particulars of the books desired. All such applications should be made through the County Librarian, County Offices, Newtown St. Boswells.

No. 22255. Class 636



CAT'S CRADLE

AUBREY DE SELINCOURT



Cat's Cradle

Decorations by
H. SEGAL

ROXBURGHSHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
COUNTY LIBRARY

London
MICHAEL JOSEPH

22255.

First published by
MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD
26 Bloomsbury Street,
*London, W.C.*1
1955

Set and printed in Great Britain by Tonbridge Printers Ltd, Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge, Kent, in Bell eleven on thirteen point, on paper made by Henry Bruce at Currie, Scotland, and bound by James Burn at Esher

CONTENTS

The House 9

Wuzzy 15

Fluff 28

Travelling 32

Duke—and a Few Others 36

Buzzle 40

Just a Few Cats 50

Sally and George 53

The End of an Epoch 60

The Hut 64

The Birds 69

Susie 74

Sailing with Susie 80

Moira 89

The Chain 93

Fudge 97

Improvements 102

The Laburnum Tree 107

The Roof 110

The Fire 116

Hodge 123

Sixpence 127

A Loss 132

More Birds 136

More about Fudge 140

Supper Time 150

Fudge Again 154

TO OLIVE

with my love, and in memory
of many happy days at Nutkins

THE HOUSE

Any cat of decent feelings who, for no fault of his own, found himself temporarily homeless, might well, as he stepped along Lacey's Lane upon pleasure or business, stop for a moment at the back gate of Nutkins, or perhaps at one of the holes in the privet hedge, look through in the imperturbable and speculative manner of his kind—and wonder. 'Yes,' I can fancy him saying; 'the garden is good; the house, from what I can see of it, looks promising enough. If the people, too, come up to standard, I think it will do.'

In point of fact, this is exactly how we ourselves, many years ago, came to possess Nutkins. We, too, were homeless. The world was before us, and there was a small—a very small—sum of money in the bank. We were staying with Mrs Hatcher, at the top of Institute Hill, and one day as we were returning to the village from the beach, we stopped, with one accord, outside the gate of Nutkins. It was the front gate, painted green, and surmounted with a thick tod of ivy. On each side was a high, thick hedge; a chimney was smoking above the thatch. The village was quiet enough in those days, but the cottage behind that

hedge, and the imagined garden beyond, were quieter still. Like inquisitive children we peered through the slats of the gate. The warm grey stone of the cottage, the magnolia tree between the french window and the porch, the glimpse of lawn on the right, the sheltering trees—all had a withdrawn and secret look, yet welcoming.

'Lucky people!' said Rosalind.

'It would be just right for us,' I said, and glanced at Rosalind—small, straight, and as slender as a wagtail, her hair, bobbed in those days, lying close to her shapely head.

'If only it was for sale——' she whispered.

'And not too expensive——'

Back in our lodging on Institute Hill, Mrs Hatcher brought us tea. She put down the tray and then stood by the door, preparing for her bit of daily gossip—for what good are lodgers if not to be talked to? This time, however, she was not to be given the first word.

'By the way,' said Rosalind with assumed carelessness, 'who lives in the cottage at the corner of Lacey's Lane—the lovely one with the thatched roof, and the magnolia, and the honeysuckle, and . . . and everything?'

Mrs Hatcher beamed upon us in a comfortable way and settled down to a nice bit of local and personal history. I don't think we paid much attention to what she said—until the last sentence. *That* was electrifying. The gist of it was that the gentleman and lady ('ever such a nice lady and gentleman,' as Mrs Hatcher put it) who lived at Nutkins (they were away at the time) were at that very moment about to leave England. They were, in fact, going to settle in Australia.

Now, one does not emigrate to Australia and keep possession of a small cottage in the Isle of Wight. The inference was obvious; so, having obtained the name and address of the owners, we wrote that very evening to make our

enquiries. The reply was highly satisfactory; for the price they asked was within our means: it was, indeed, so ridiculously small that, in these changed times, I gasp at our good fortune when I remember it.

Within a day or two they had returned, and, having been invited in their letter to call on them and discuss the matter further, we did so as soon as was decently possible after their arrival.

Mrs Hatcher was right about the lady and gentleman. Nobody could have been more charming. They had no desire to go away, and mourned the family changes which had made their departure necessary. But go they must, and, if the house had to pass into other hands, they were glad, they told us, that it should be into the hands of someone who would love it as they loved it themselves.

I can, therefore, having myself been through a similar experience, enter into the feelings of that right-minded cat I mentioned at the beginning. I say 'cat'; but, as the following pages will show, it was considerably more than one who, guessing on the strength of a preliminary inspection that Nutkins would do, guessed right.

It was not, if I remember, on our first visit to the cottage, but on a subsequent one a few days later, that we met Wuzzy. We were on the lawn by the walnut tree, talking to his mistress, when he appeared from somewhere or other, rubbed himself casually against her legs and marched off towards the open french window. Rosalind glanced after him.

'That's a fine cat,' she said.

'He's not a cat,' his mistress answered; 'he's a Christian.'

That's as may be; but a fine cat he undoubtedly was.

Now it is possible, but I think foolish, for a person who is fond of cats not to have any. I know it is possible, because at the moment of which I am writing—some thirty-five

years ago—Rosalind and I neither had a cat nor any particular intention of getting one. Nevertheless I suppose it is true that inside all of us certain wishes and certain purposes are all the time working away in secret without our being very much aware of them, until one day, under a happy combination of circumstances, they suddenly declare themselves, and we do something which we innocently fancy to be the moment's whim. Then, if the whim leads to important consequences, we call them destiny.

It was our destiny to have a cat: indeed, a lot of cats; and the first step upon our road was now about to be taken.

Wuzzy had not gone in through the french window. He was sitting on what we came afterwards to call the verandah (because of the eave of thatch which runs, like an eyebrow, across the end of the house above it), very upright on his haunches, in that marble immobility which is the perfect complement of a cat's swiftness and grace.

His mistress looked at him. 'You see,' she said pensively, 'it's *his* house, too.' And then she went on to tell us how two years before, shortly after she and her husband had come to Nutkins, Wuzzy had presented himself one day at the back door and asked for admission.

'He just wanted to live here,' she added. 'Like you.'

Rosalind nodded.

'Like us,' she said.

Well, there was the problem. Wuzzy could not go to Australia. It was much too long a journey for a cat; besides, it was full of blue gum trees, which he would hate —and it did not look as if he could live in England either. He had been much loved; he had lived long enough at Nutkins to become deeply attached to his property; and to be deprived of that and of his people at the same time would have been too cruel a blow. The harsh alternative was obvious, but unexpressed.

It was not really (Rosalind being what she is) a very difficult problem, and the upshot was that when we completed the purchase of the cottage, we bought Wuzzy with it.

Yet what an odd thing it was that Wuzzy, just like us, should have known at a glance on that morning two years before that Nutkins was *his* house. Odd, but at the same time sensible. Perhaps he had taken one or two preliminary looks around the garden before his future master and mistress were awake in those summer dawns which preceded his arrival—very early, before the sun was over High Hat and while the dew was still thick on the lawn, and only the birds were busy. He could then have assured himself that it was the sort of garden a cat could be happy in. He would have observed, for instance, that though it was small it could not all be seen at a single glance—an important quality in gardens—but was full of odd angles and lurking places, where a warm corner to blink and drowse in could always be found when the sun was shining. Naturally, too, he would have noticed the thatch which, over the porch and under the bedroom window, provides convenient access to the upstair rooms and an amusing place from which to watch the various goings-on down below. All very satisfactory, I do not doubt—provided, of course (an essential point), that the *people* were all right. For there should be no need to emphasize the absurdity of the common belief that cats attach themselves only to places, never to people. A cat's response to affection, though different in quality and expression, is no less genuine and immediate than a dog's. Cats do not demand attention as dogs do; but if they get it, they answer it and return the like. If they get none, they withdraw into their own aloof and uncomplaining selves. When this occurs, the more's the pity; but there is no helping it. A dull man will have a

dull cat, or a dull dog—or even a dull child; for it takes two to make a relationship, irrespective of how many feet the parties to it may have.

Wuzzy, then, came into our possession at the same time as Nutkins; or, to put the nature of the transaction more properly, he retained his share in the house and garden and accepted us as his new partners. The arrangement was a very happy one for all three of us.

WUZZY

When Wuzzy first entered into partnership with us, the village was very different from what it is today. It was a better place for cats then, because the road which runs past the cottage was no wider than Lacey's Lane; it was separated from the garden by a small stream, the beginnings of the River Yar, and there was no motor traffic of any kind, public or private. It was a better place for Rosalind and me too; for we both enjoyed being taken into town by Mr Jacobs and his pony when we happened to have some shopping to do. It was also pleasant to lie in bed in the early morning and hear the slow crunch of wheels on the gritty road, and the clop of hooves, and people's voices wishing each other good morning in a tone and accent which seemed to imply that the day was long and there was no particular hurry to get to the end of it. Both cats and men could walk abroad with a nonchalance which seems to have departed in these brisker and more efficient days.

The house and garden, too, were different. The house was called Myrtle Cottage—tiresomely, but not inappropriately, for there was in fact a myrtle bush on each side of

what is now my study window. But we did not like the name and, as it is not unlucky to change the name of a house as it certainly is to change the name of a boat, we changed it. Or, rather, we restored it; for we discovered with pleasure from the title deeds that it was described there as 'formerly a part of a farm called Nutkins' and that it had, in fact, belonged a century or more ago to a farmer of that name. The change we made, therefore, was merely an act of justice, and does not, as so many passing visitors in August seem to suppose, refer in any way to Miss Potter's immortal squirrel.

In aspect, too, the cottage was different. Ivy a foot thick covered the beautiful grey stone right up to the eaves, and the first month or so of our occupation we spent in pulling it off and cutting back other outrageous growths which kept all but a glimmer of light from the rooms downstairs. More of the garden was a wilderness then than now; the cultivated parts of it were, with true kindliness and generosity, planted and tended to the very last by our predecessors, so that on our first morning (it was early July) we were able to have strawberries for breakfast; but the wilderness was wild indeed. Especially I remember, in our earlier summers, the cow parsley in the dell: cow parsley is a noxious weed, but when in flower, provided there is enough of it, it is lovely. It is the colour of moonlight, and looking into the dell from the sitting-room window one would have thought that wreaths of light mist lay along the sloping banks. And there was the walnut tree—we had too many trees in those days growing in the hedge along the Whitwell road; they kept the sun from the garden and crowded too close to the sitting-room window, so we cut down three or four; but the walnut we loved. It stood on the lawn just where it dips to the dell, and full opposite the sitting-room window—not too near to obscure the light. It was an old tree, its bark

near the base already beginning to peel off in decay. It was beautiful, as walnut trees always are—in the evening its trunk seemed to hold the vanished light and to glow softly, like mother-of-pearl. After ten years or so it was blown down during the Christmas holidays by an easterly gale. I am still reminded of it when I mow the lawn, because there is a shallow hollow like a saucer in the place where it stood.

Neither Rosalind nor I was a very good gardener in those early days. The garden seemed to us pretty enough as it was, and we were content to keep it so. Conscience had not yet developed, and perhaps we were all the happier for the fact that it was still dormant. It has not fully developed even today, though it is much stronger than it used to be and now and then a nuisance. Conscience in gardeners is a tricky thing—rather like that spice of poison, strychnine or whatever it is, in a tonic: take too much and it kills you. If one gets to hate a weed beyond a certain pitch of intensity, one will never really enjoy the flowers; one will prowl round the garden in early April glaring at the celandines with a baleful and bitter eye, and quite forget to notice that the buds of apple blossom are swelling. But in those young days we took the celandines and coltsfoot, and the almost ineradicable artichokes, lightly enough. For one thing, we employed a gardener—I like the phrase and will let it stand. We paid him half a crown a week, for a nominal half-day's work; but for some reason or other he took a fancy to our garden, and I think in a lesser degree to us, and was in and out continually, doing jobs always of his own choice, never of ours.

Putty Jolliffe (as the villagers called him) was a very little old man of about eighty. He was the colour of clay soil baked hard in a spell of hot weather—the same colour all over, boots, clothes, hands, face, even his moustache,

which had gone off-white and taken a similar tinge from tobacco juice. The only thing about him not clay-coloured was his eye—his one eye; and that was a pale and startling blue. He was very bent and very slow in movement; yet, working at his own leisurely pace, he never seemed to tire and astonished us by the amount he got through. He had skill, too, though he was not a gardener by profession—or, if not skill, at least a happy touch. 'What Jolliffe puts in *grows*,' he was fond of saying; and it was not an idle boast. He had a puckish enjoyment of my ignorance, and liked to be consulted upon every point, however trivial. Sometimes I would be digging in my over-fervid way, and, straightening my aching back for a moment's rest, I would see Mr Jolliffe leaning on his hoe and eyeing me with malicious glee: 'Now doan't 'ee *snatch* at it, Master,' he would say. It was admirable advice, but even now I have not really succeeded in learning his lesson. I am still a rather desperate gardener.

Naturally Mr Jolliffe did not really approve of Wuzzy. Few countrymen do approve of cats, least of all those who work in gardens. Cats lie on the seed bed, scrabble in the onions and pounce between the pea-sticks. Gardeners object to this. Of course, when some scrawny and marauding tom from over the way—some brute who is nothing to me nor I to him—comes into my garden and does these things, I am properly enraged; and I deprecate it even when my own cats do. Indeed, I wish they wouldn't. Nevertheless one must keep one's sense of proportion; one must see life steadily, and as much of it as possible at once, and cats—one's own cats—are, or ought to be, very much a part of life. Wuzzy was not Mr Jolliffe's cat, so I cannot blame him for failing to appreciate his qualities or to recognize his beauty.

Wuzzy was a noble and majestic beast. He was a short-

haired, brindled tabby, very large and firm—all *cat*, as we used to say—with white chest and paws. His habitual expression was one of combined dignity and tolerance. Sometimes sitting under a bush or by a sunny wall, motionless and withdrawn, with all Egypt in his half-closed eyes and a sort of *sadness* upon him, as I think there is upon nearly all animals, he would remind us of our friend H. W. Nevinson—if any of my readers are old enough to remember that great man, who met Wuzzy upon several occasions and admired him as he admired all four-footed beasts, both wild and tame.

There was no nonsense about Wuzzy; he was a very downright person. Unlike most of our cats, he preferred my knee to that of his mistress, and, when the whim took him to sit upon it, there was no coyness or hesitation in his approach; he marched up to my chair, instantly placed a powerful forefoot on my thigh (to hold it in position), and jumped up. Lying on my lap he would stretch to an unprecedented length, and reach with his forefeet halfway down between my knees and the floor. To demand admittance to a room, he would stand on his hind legs, curl a paw round the door-handle, and rattle it. He preferred to be patted vigorously on the flank to being stroked or fondled, and if I held my clenched fist within an inch or two of his head, it was his pleasure, if he felt that way, to butt it hard. He was magnificently greedy, and omnivorous, though his favourite food was sprats. Once he lifted a whole leg of mutton from the kitchen table and deposited it on the floor—but had not time to finish it. He retained into old age an insatiable interest in paper bags and parcels of all kinds—I can see him now, though he died thirty years ago, on a certain occasion when Rosalind and I were planting daffodils in the dell, come helter-skelter across the lawn and dive headlong into the large brown-paper bag which held

the bulbs. Sometimes he would leap from a branch directly on to my back as I bent over my spade, and nearly knock me down, and one particular amusement of his was to work a hole in the bags of chicken-meal and eat away at the contents till he was sick of them.

'Oh, look,' Rosalind would say with obvious appreciation, when she caught him at it; 'isn't he *naughty!*'

Yes; we kept chickens for a short time, but only a very short time, I am glad to say. We had about a dozen hens and a cock; but though three of the hens were called Mary, Martha and Magdalen, I could never get fond of them. Hens to my mind are tiresome and somewhat futile birds; the expression on their faces is at once mean and stupid; they haven't a thought in their heads, and all their actions are reflex, and silly at that. Of course I was *sorry* for the creatures; so was Rosalind, and we were therefore incapable of doing what ought to be done to a hen when she gets past laying properly. I can hardly believe it now, but it is a fact that we entertained, for a fleeting moment, the wild idea of keeping about a hundred of the beastly birds in our diminutive chicken-run, and of making our fortune out of them. It would not have been much of a fortune.

Wuzzy was respectful of the hens; I suppose any cat would be, because hens can be pretty savage, as well as cretinous. What was more surprising was his behaviour to a batch of day-old chicks we once acquired. We put the chicks under a little wire coop on the lawn, and watched Wuzzy narrowly for a while in case he should show signs of misbehaving towards them. He did not, so gradually we gave up worrying; then one day we found him comfortably sitting on top of the coop, gazing around at anything rather than the little yellow balls of life which scuttled about quite unperturbed below.

I should not have mentioned the hens (ducks are quite different: we had a couple of ducks once which fed from the cats' plates and bit the legs of unpopular callers) but for one small agreeable incident which arose from our keeping them. This was our long connection with Mr Niblett. Mr Niblett was a gardener who worked at one of the big gardens in the Undercliff, and we agreed to give him a dozen of our fertilized eggs in exchange for a dozen unfertilized ones of his own. It did not occur to us, as we only wanted the eggs to eat, that the exchange was anything but fair and equal; Mr Niblett, however, was embarrassingly grateful, and next morning we found three large cauliflowers on the cobbles outside our back door. A week later there was another offering, and again the week after that. Somewhat puzzled, I thanked Mr Niblett when I next met him. He beamed down upon me (he was very tall and as straight as a soldier) and said in his pleasant, sing-song, Island speech: 'You do me a koindness—so I do *'ee* a koindness—that's where 'tis!' And the vegetables continued to appear at the back door for a long while to come. Mr Niblett and Mr Jolliffe were contemporaries; those two and one other, Mr Salter, who did the hedges and ditches and had a passionate interest in the village cricket, were the last three I remember who had the true Island speech. It seems to have vanished now: a great pity, because it was a pleasing and distinctive dialect. A point about it which I liked to observe was the strong aspirating of words which begin with 'R'—as in ancient Greek.

This exchange of produce is an old-established country custom, I suppose everywhere. It is a good and kindly custom, but a little spoiled by what I can only believe is pride. Often I should like to give some neighbour a present —usually, in our case, of apples, because in a good year we

have far more of them than we can possibly use; but I can never do it without receiving an immediate return, say a basket of beans or a couple of broccoli. One could, of course, regard the whole business as a sort of barter, or trading in kind: you choose, for instance, a neighbour who you happen to know is rich in onions—a commodity you are short of—and dump on his doorstep a nice little picking of your late peas, in the confident belief that the onions will appear upon your own doorstep next day. It's not a bad method of trade—but I don't really like it much. I would rather be able to give a genuine present now and again, and nobody could be more ready than I am to receive one. There is Mrs G., for instance. Mrs G. is a very old friend of ours; she had a proper regard for Wuzzy, as for all our other cats, who used to spend, and do still spend, a certain amount of time in her garden, and even, I believe, in her kitchen—though our dogs, even the mildest of them, have always terrified her. She never enters our house without a biscuit in her pocket, with which to buy off Susie, our present dog, in case of an assault—a sop to Cerberus. Poor Susie, no one else in the world, so far as I know, has ever put her in the same category as the guardian of hell. Now Mrs G. is fond of apples but has no apple trees. She is particularly fond of our Bramleys, because they make good pies, and her husband, she has often told us, likes an apple pie. Moreover, she has said to us more than once that there are no apples like Nutkins' apples, and after a compliment like that, even if we were not fond of her, as indeed we are, how could we not wish to give her a few now and again? Of course we do wish it, but—there is always that retributory cauliflower or basket of runners to take the edge off the gift. However, we have hit on a stratagem which, once a year at any rate, gets round the difficulty: it is quite simple—we just put by a dozen or so of the best

Bramleys, all of a size if possible, and give them to Mrs G. on Christmas morning, when her own garden is bare and she is unable to retaliate. Even then, her hens may be laying; but that is a risk we have to take.

It was to Mrs. G.'s charge that, going away once on a short visit during those first eighteen months when we lived continuously at Nutkins, we entrusted Wuzzy. An empty house is depressing for a cat, but at least we knew that he would be properly fed; nevertheless we found on our return that he had moped and refused his food. He was low and miserable and it was some days before he was his shining self again. Unfortunately one cannot apologize to a cat, though I am sure both Rosalind and I would have liked to do so. People say cats don't care; and I am willing enough to admit that they are toughish beasts with a fine streak of independence in them, and that they will put up with almost anything once they are used to it. The necessary and utilitarian cat which one knows so well as a sort of poor pensioner in cottage gardens, is, I suppose, happy enough—if one can give any precise content to that word which even in our own lives is hard to define. In any case, such creatures rub along. But whenever I see, for instance, the little beast who belongs to a family not far from here, and remember that, though he is the children's favourite toy, he is not allowed inside the house (I have observed him on the window-sill, looking in), I am sorry not only for him, who misses so many of life's more civilized pleasures, but for his owners too, who are missing hardly less. Half the fun of keeping a cat is to spoil him within reason; for it is only then that he properly reveals himself. Susie, too, I regret to say, is not polite to this particular cat; he ventures now and then into our garden, and Susie chases him, gleefully, up the ilex tree. Only the other day I found her barking up it, while Fudge and Sixpence (of whom I

shall have much to say later on) sat side by side on the manure-heap at the foot, watching the proceedings with an expression of smug amusement.

Wuzzy was the only one of our many cats to be allowed to sleep on our bed. He accepted the privilege in a most gentlemanly and deferential way, coming in through the window along the thatch over the verandah, when he tired of the dark garden, and settling quietly down at the extreme foot of the bed. There he would remain without stirring until morning, when he would move up and sit between us to exchange compliments at the beginning of a new day. One morning, I remember, he stayed at the bed's foot, apparently in deep sleep; missing our usual greeting I reached over to pick him up, and he uttered a cry of pain. The vet, when he came later, said his shoulder was dislocated. How he had met with this accident I have no idea; but in spite of the injury he had made his way up on to the thatch and entered our room, to sleep in his accustomed place. Not even Wuzzy, however, enjoyed this privilege for long; for Anne was born two years later. Anne slept in our room, and both Rosalind and I had heard tales of cats lying on babies' faces and stifling them. For a time we tried the expedient of preventing Wuzzy from getting in by fixing a wire frame in the window—leaving, of course, another convenient window or door open for him on the ground floor. But this was a failure. Wuzzy was furious; night after night he came along the thatch as usual, banged at the wire with his front feet and plucked it with his claws, until we were forced to unfasten the whole contraption, let him in, and carry him downstairs. After that there was nothing for it but to get him in at night before we went to bed. This was not always easy: one of his favourite seats round about bedtime was the thatch over the lavatory, and I still have a picture in my

mind of Rosalind outside the back door, tinkling a saucer with a teaspoon and calling to him, fruitlessly, in her most beguiling tones.

The effortless movement and superb agility of cats need no stressing; but Wuzzy—then seven or eight years old—gave us one instance of it which I shall never forget. He was sitting on the lawn, nonchalantly cleaning the inner side of his hind leg, when a bird, I think a chaffinch, came flying low over the grass towards him. As it flashed by, Wuzzy rose into the air, apparently without effort, and caught it. Rosalind in those days did not yet love the birds quite as she does now, when (as it seems to me) she knows by name and character each single one that comes into the garden; she loved them—as I still do—only because they were living creatures, and beautiful; so when Wuzzy caught the chaffinch, she chased him with a stick and made him drop the poor little body; but though she was angry, she was no less filled than I with astonishment and admiration.

Wuzzy was about eleven when he first had to move from Nutkins. It had seemed a good thing to Rosalind and me, as we had come to Nutkins just after the end of the war, to do as little work as possible for as long as possible, to compensate ourselves for what had gone before. But, of course, when Anne was born, we had to think again, especially as the weekly journals for which I reviewed books had a distressing tendency to go bankrupt. So Wuzzy came with us to Bembridge, where, in spite of a solemn vow made many years before that I would never, under any circumstances, do such a thing, I became a schoolmaster. Nothing, however—not even having a tooth out—is as bad in fact as it is in prospect; and, 'all professions' as Wordsworth neatly put it when he was wondering, as a very young man, how to earn his bread and butter, 'are

attended with great inconveniences.' He never spoke a truer word; at the same time, if a man is determined to be miserable, he can manage it very nicely even while doing what he fancies he likes best. The worst inconvenience, for us, of my becoming a schoolmaster, was the necessity of leaving Nutkins for the best two-thirds of the year, especially the garden, though a house, too, has seasons, and is not the same in spring as in autumn or winter. Even to know a house, and properly to possess it, one must live in it through the cycle of the year, and this is obviously much more necessary in the case of a garden. It is not merely that one misses things: not merely that one is gone before the lupins and delphiniums flower, and cannot see the dry, curled leaves of sycamore on the path outside the study window on the first frosty morning of October; not merely that it is no good growing strawberries or that one has to pick the Bramleys three weeks too soon: these and a hundred others things—such as the rooks who come and talk in the ash tree near the bedroom window on autumn mornings, and the delighted astonishment with which (every year) we see at least one magnolia flower open in November—are indeed things we grieve to miss; but merely to be deprived of this that or the other is by no means the extent of the loss. The real loss is something subtler than a series of deprivations: it is a loss of the garden's inmost spirit and essence, which are inseparable from seasonal change.

Wuzzy did not mind the move as much as we feared he would. In fact, I think he quite liked the big bare fields where the mushrooms grew, and even tolerated the beastly bungalow. He used to come along the path to meet me on my way home from school, and sometimes accompanied us on walks a considerable distance from the house along the edge of the cliff above Whitecliff bay.

Three years later we moved again, this time to Oxford —Wuzzy by then was old—and the change was too much for him. The house was tolerable, though not our kind of house; but the garden was bad—a polite rectangle with flagged paths, formal beds, and one large apple tree, which bore no fruit, in the middle. Wuzzy must have hated it. He died quite soon after our arrival there, and was buried in that stiff garden. As I have done with all our best-loved cats, I wrapped him up in one of my old coats before I buried him.

FLUFF

To go back a little: Wuzzy had not been with us for more than a year or so, when during breakfast one morning, a small kitten scrambled on to the window-sill from the cobbled path which leads to the back door, and hopped down into the room. She was too young to have thought the matter out, as I imagine Wuzzy did; but her conclusions were evidently the same: she had come to stay. We did not want Fluff in the least (she would not have been christened Fluff a few years later, when our children had begun to exercise their embarrassing ingenuity in names); one cat, or so we supposed, was quite enough. But you know how it is: one thoughtlessly takes the first step —a little bit of breakfast perhaps—and the thing is done. Partly, I think, it is the *confidence* of certain small beasts which gets under my guard and makes nonsense of the dictates of prudence. Here was Fluff, for instance, not a span long, moving around amongst all those strange large feet under the breakfast-table in perfect assurance that not a single one of them would do her any harm. If ever a kitten said a happy hullo, Fluff did on that morning. Even Wuzzy was polite to her, looking at her a little distantly, perhaps, but without any obvious resentment.

She was exquisitely pretty, a long-haired tortoiseshell, born to have her picture on a chocolate-box, and her taking up residence at Nutkins was big with consequence. She had, in her time, a great many kittens.

Sensible people know what to do with superfluous kittens; lucky people have no difficulty in giving them away. We have seldom been sensible and hardly ever lucky. Moreover, we had children, to whom the kittens were a delight. Indeed, I was—and am—very fond of them myself. It was a good saying of Leigh Hunt's that a house is not complete without a child rising six years and a kitten rising six months—though I think that in the case of the kitten he got the age wrong. Six weeks would have been better than six months—and two kittens would have been better than one. Undoubtedly two would have been much better; for though kittens and cats are more inventive and ingenious in their play than any other animals (what other animal would play with a table-leg?), they nevertheless play best with their own kind. To watch one kitten at play is pleasure enough; but to watch two—the sidelong approach, back arched, legs stiff; the pounce and tumble; the double leap into the air with arms spread wide; the mad career, when the galloping feet sound like Lilliputian thunder or rain upon the roof; tiny triangular faces, ears flat, eyes wild, appearing over the chair-back or under the vallance; the sudden lapse into sleep: to watch this is the best waster of time in a busy life that I know of. A six-weeks puppy is *unfinished*, and that is no small part of his charm; but a six-weeks kitten is already perfect, and it is the combination of this perfection with his diminutive size that makes him so delightful.

To return to Fluff—*spes tanta nepotum*—and her innumerable children. Poor Fluff, she was at it all the time, though

the hard work spoiled neither her gaiety nor her prettiness. She kept her figure wonderfully well, and, unlike Topsy, a nursery cat of my childhood, never developed what we used to call a *portmanteau*. She also continued into old age to be fascinated by water, and we would find her in the scullery sink, or balanced on the water-pipe which led to it, trying to catch the drips from the tap. But she had no conception of the meaning of self-control.

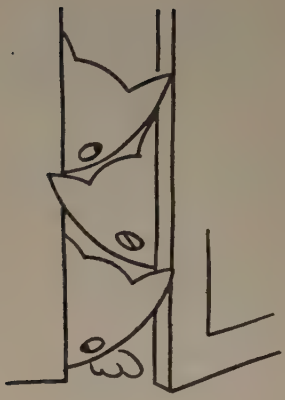
So much motherhood was bound to spoil her character a little—or, to put it more properly, to blunt the fine edge of her individuality and merge her in her kind. Nevertheless, in the very matter of motherhood she on one occasion had a surprise for us. The thatch over the children's bedroom had been a good deal pulled about by starlings, who had made holes under the foot-thick eaves and built nests in them. One day when Rosalind was in the bedroom, looking out of the window, she heard a familiar sound—that of a very young kitten with a very big voice squalling for his mama. Unaccountably, the sound came from *above*. Rosalind listened, and it came again, loud and clamant. Puzzled, she looked up; then, thinking she must be mistaken, looked down into the branches of the japonica under the window, then all around. Again the cry was repeated—quite obviously from above; and then at last Rosalind realized where it had come from. Fluff had kittened in a starling's nest. It was not easy to see how she had got there: even by way of the japonica it must have been a most awkward climb; but, somehow or other, she *had* got there; and there was the kitten—for, this time, there was only one.

The first thing Rosalind did was, I need hardly say, to hurry to the shed at the end of the garden, drag out the ladder and prop it up against the house immediately below Fluff's nursery; and it was a pleasant sight after that to see Fluff gravely mounting it when she wanted her child, or

more awkwardly and slitheringly descending when she was temporarily sick of him.

The kitten who had so unusual an entrance into the world was not remarkable. He was named Tuppence, from the two dark circular patches on his white coat, and did nothing of note during his life with us. That life was not very long, for we gave him to someone we knew in Bembridge, where he busied himself in filling Hill Way with a number of replicas—some of them tuppences, some threepences.

We were lucky for once with Tuppence, in that we found him a home; but, as I have said, such luck has been rare. Nevertheless we did succeed in preventing the number of our cats from ever rising above seven at any one time. But even seven is too many. It is difficult to have a proper relationship with seven cats all at once: the thing becomes too dilute. So either one tends to take the lot for granted, or to have favourites, which is hard luck on the others. I am afraid we did, very definitely, have favourites, and I can remember, if I think hard, quite a number who were merely tolerated as poor relations. One of them was named (insultingly) Mouse.



TRAVELLING

Our large family of cats was soon increased by the addition of a dog. Seven cats and a dog are a serious business even to feed; but I think we were most conscious of inconvenience when it came to travelling; for naturally they all came with us, to and fro on our journeys between school and Nutkins. Dogs, of course, are never any trouble at such times; it was the cats who were the difficulty. In the first place it was no mean task merely to collect them in time for the start. The process used to begin in the very early morning, each cat, as he was found and seized, being put into whatever room we thought would be least frequented during the following hours, and the door firmly shut. The job, especially when the children were growing up, was to *keep* it firmly shut. Cats are uncannily quick to sense a coming upheaval: they know a journey is imminent even before the boxes and baskets and other paraphernalia begin to appear. So do dogs; but a dog's behaviour on such an occasion is the opposite of a cat's: you simply can't get rid of a dog once you have begun to pack; he is under your feet all the time; he follows you like a shadow wherever you go in his anxiety not to be left

behind. A cat, on the contrary, will do everything he can think of (and that is a great deal) to avoid and evade you: he *wants* to be left behind—or, rather, knowing you cannot go without him, he is quietly determined, if he can, to make you miss the train. 'Why bother?' he seems to say. 'We are quite all right where we are.'

We generally managed to collect four or five of the seven fairly quickly; but there were always two or three who played the devil.

'Where's Puff?' Rosalind would say in a challenging manner, having looked into the dining-room and shut the door again hard.

'*I* don't know,' I would answer—and add, apologetically, 'But Fluff's there, and Wuzzy, and Tuppence, and——'

'But not Puff,' accusingly from Rosalind. '*Find* Puff.'

And off I would go for another hunt, round and round the garden, in and out of all the rooms, into the shed where the apples are stored, into the coal-house, peering under bushes, staring up trees, calling and calling with rising wrath and diminishing hope.

Usually Puff—or whoever it was—was captured in the end and bundled into her travelling-basket—we had, I remember, three large baskets and one medium one for the seven cats: the medium-sized one was for Wuzzy, and in the others the remaining six were paired off according to temperament and mutual toleration.

On one occasion, however, we very nearly had to leave with one cat short. It was at Bembridge, and we were on the way to Nutkins for the summer holiday. We were travelling by road, and the van was at the door—but I must say a word about the van first. We had no car then, and indeed if we had had one, it would have been perfectly useless, for it would not have held a quarter of the things we had to take. Rosalind and I and Anne, to start with—

for Lesley was not yet born; then the nurse and a domestic, the eight animals, and ordinary luggage for the lot: that, I suppose, might have been squeezed into a car; but, in addition, there were a great many other things, and bulky things at that, which could definitely not have been squeezed in: there was, for instance, Anne's cot, a large and safe one which, when folded up, made a flat, oblong parcel eighteen inches thick. Then, as we could not afford to duplicate such things, there were sheets and blankets for the whole household; and, lastly, a tin hip-bath for Anne. Clearly, therefore, a van was needed. Somewhat incongruously (as it seems in retrospect) another van we hired in Winchester for the same purpose on future occasions had some sinister connection with the Law. It was not exactly a Black Maria, but it certainly used to visit the inside of prison yards.

Well then, our van (this time a common and innocent one) was, as I was saying, ready at the door—and one of the cats was still missing. The little wretch was nowhere to be found. We all did our best, but to no avail—we would have to go without him. Sadly we piled ourselves into the van, and were on the point of driving off when Rosalind heard a pitiful small wail from somewhere in the hedge by the side of the lane. Out I jumped, and there was the cat (alas, I forget his name), not by any means playing the tiresome tricks we were blaming him for, but innocent, and hurt, and crying for our help. He had broken a front paw. We took him, I remember, to the nurse at the school sanatorium, and she made it reasonably comfortable for him; then we wrapped him up in Anne's shawl and Rosalind kept him on her knee during the drive to Nutkins.

One other incident of a similar sort, but more remarkable, I must record (Rosalind, by the way, whose book this is as much as it is mine, has just reminded me of it). This time we actually did leave one cat behind, and the cat was

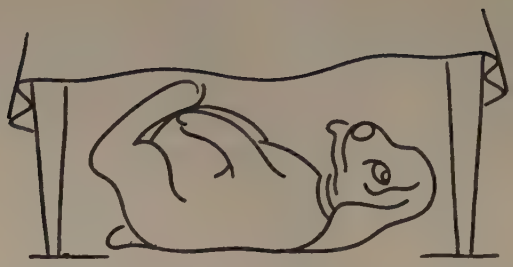
Fluff. It was the end of the holidays, and we were bound back to Oxford. I will not dwell upon our distress at leaving her, or our certainty that we should never see her again, for that is not the point of the story; the point is, that next holidays, when we returned to Nutkins, after an absence of three months, we had not been five minutes in the house before Fluff walked in. She entered with perfect nonchalance, hardly bothering to say hullo, much as if we had merely been out to tea next door; and she was fat as butter and as fit as a fiddle. My dear Fluff—you knew of a nice little boarding-house down the lane: that is obvious; but how on earth did you know the precise moment of our return?

Travelling with our seven cats by train was even more inconvenient than travelling by road. It ought to have been expensive as well as inconvenient, but in fact it was not. I should probably hesitate to mention this, had I not once been abetted by an amused and sympathetic ticket-collector.

'What have you got in those baskets?' he asked, as from one of them came a plaintive cry.

'Cats,' I said, and added innocently: 'I don't have to pay for them, do I?'

Of course I knew I ought to have paid. What I ought to have done was to buy seven small return tickets, one for each; and the ticket-collector knew that I knew. However, he merely shook his head at me in mild reproof, and passed on. I was emboldened by this to buy no tickets for the cats on any subsequent journey, and to hope that the cats would keep quiet at the awkward moments and not let me down. The hope was consistently fulfilled. Those were free-and-easy days; I have a feeling that British Railways might now be less tolerant.



DUKE—AND A FEW OTHERS

Duke, our first dog, was a pure-bred black cocker, and we gave him to Anne on her second birthday. Anne loved animals before she could talk, and I can still see her grey-blue eyes (exactly like her mother's) all alight with pleasure as she leaned over from her bed and lifted the lid of the hamper which we had put beside her, with the lid a crack open, so that she could find Duke the moment she woke up in the morning. I believe she half-guessed what the present was to be; anyway she wanted a puppy badly, and already at two years old that was near to an assumption that she should have one.

It is an odd thing, but Duke also, like Wuzzy, had a strong resemblance to H. W. Nevinson, though he had no resemblance to Wuzzy. Indeed he was named after our friend, Grand Duke being one of his many nicknames. I can only suppose that the resemblance consisted in a certain expression of countenance, common to all three, which seemed to carry in it a suggestion of wisdom, dignity and sadness, much knowledge, combined with a resigned acceptance of the wickedness of men.

It was in connection with a week-end visit of Nevinson to Nutkins that Duke performed the one notable act of his

short life. Rosalind had prepared a tremendous supper, and everything, including a slab of cheese about half a pound in weight, was laid out on the table against our guest's arrival. The coming of even a well-loved guest causes a certain flutter and confusion in inexperienced housekeepers, as we were in those days; but the flutter and confusion were greatly increased when Rosalind, going into the dining-room for yet another last-minute inspection of the table, found Duke crouching beneath it and evidently in pain. I was called, and together we examined him—*and* the supper-table. Comparison of the two revealed that he had taken the cheese and eaten the lot. His poor little stomach was blown out like a balloon, and we were in great anxiety for his life. We were still in doubt what to do, when our visitor arrived, and advised castor oil. A large dose was promptly administered, and never have I seen a remedy act with such speed and success. Duke *went down*, visibly, before our eyes, and very soon was his infantile, waggish self again. He came with us to Oxford, but only once or twice; for he was barely a year old before a fool of a nurse, acting against the strictest orders, let him off his lead in the Banbury Road, and he was run over and killed.

Clearly it was necessary to have another dog, if only for Anne's sake. In point of fact, so far as Anne herself was concerned, almost any sort of animal would have been welcome; for Anne had a large heart. There was a period in our history, when she was about eight years old, which makes me blush a little when I recall it, because I feel that the live-stock we kept really exceeded the decent limits of a private zoo. The cats and dogs were all right, and so were the ponies—one for Anne, the other for Lesley, our second daughter, who was then four. Cats and dogs and ponies are, for a family who lives in the country, merely normal; but the same can hardly be said of the piglet who lived by his

own choice mostly in the coal-cellar, except when he was sunning himself, like a watch-dog, in the porch. Then there were the ducks (who chased our visitors, pecking their legs), and, lastly, the hedgehog. I had never before, and have never since, had a domestic relationship with a hedgehog; but, though I cannot claim to have been actually fond of him, as both Anne and her mother undoubtedly were, I admit that he had charm. Rosalind began by bathing him in soapy water, with a dash of Jeyes' to get rid of the lice. He did not appear to resent this at all, and quickly settled in as one of the family. He used to sit on Rosalind's lap and be stroked—one-way stroking, I need hardly say; and he would express his enjoyment of this by a low, snuffling purr. He would walk upstairs, laboriously, and descend, in a series of bumps and tumbles, step by step; in winter he would sit with evident satisfaction by the fire, his front feet on the fender; and he invariably put himself to bed in the toy-cupboard. The cats and dogs took no particular notice of him, and the cats allowed him to drink milk from their saucers. One night he got into the conservatory, which opened out of the nursery. There was a sort of little pond in the conservatory, about eighteen inches square and only partially filled, so that the water was some distance below the rim. Presumably the hedgehog tried to drink from this; for he fell in and we found him there, drowned, the next morning.

It was at this period, when we had more beasts dependent upon us than at any other, that the children made the discovery that meat was part of a dead animal. The discovery was painful to both of them, especially to Anne, the elder, and led indirectly to a proposal from Anne which even we were unable to entertain. She had been watching a bull-calf at a neighbouring farm, and had taken a great fancy to him.

'He's sweet, Mummy,' she said, as she was undressing for bed that night.

'Yes, darling.'

'Couldn't we *have* him, Mummy?'

'Well,' said Mummy, 'where should we put him?'

'In the conservatory,' said Anne.

'But he'll grow up,' said Rosalind, looking on the dark side, as adults do. 'And bulls are very large and fierce.'

'*This* one wouldn't be fierce,' Anne instantly replied. 'They are only fierce because the men roar at them and say, *Gr-r-r, c'm up.*'

BUZZLE

As I have said, then, almost any sort of animal would, so far as Anne was concerned, have filled satisfactorily the gap left by Duke's death. However, it was filled by another puppy—Buzzle. A woman we knew used to call Buzzle Basil by mistake, and this gave us the giggles. Buzzle may be a funny name for a dog, though it never struck us as being so; but Basil struck us as very funny indeed.

Buzzle was one of a litter from over the way at the Old Rectory. His mother was a liver spaniel, his father unknown —though we could make a probable guess. His coat was smooth, mostly white, with odd areas of black and tan; there was a touch of hound about his head and muzzle, and he had, as he grew older, a spaniel's solidity and corpulence. He had a wonderful kindliness of disposition—though there is nothing remarkable in that: All respectable dogs are kind, especially to children. I remember Roger, my father's Alsatian, playing with Anne when she was three years old. Roger was treble the size and weight of Anne—standing on his hind legs he was nearly as tall as I am—and it was a pleasant sight to see Anne throwing (to a distance of about six inches and usually in the opposite direction to the one intended) a minute twig, which Roger would delicately retrieve in his immense maw and place at her feet. All

respectable dogs are kind to kittens, too, and will stand a great deal of impertinence from them; but I think Buzzle was, in this respect, kinder than most. He not only tolerated Fluff's successive broods, but appeared to have a positive affection for them. Often, when a kitten about as big as my fist was sitting within a yard of his nose as he was gnawing a bone, he would break off a fragment and offer it to the little creature. Olive (who used to cook for us, and is still a dear friend and frequently revisits Nutkins) positively asserted (though we take the story as apocryphal) that Buzzle, if he saw a kitten about to scratch in a corner, always took him by the neck and carried him out into the garden. We are not given to teaching our animals tricks, but Buzzle did acquire just one very small one: this was first to speak (a suppressed *wooff*) and then to sing (a soft low whine) before getting a special titbit. Olive declared—and still maintains—that she taught him to sing *Annie Laurie*.

Buzzle was a calm dog, unlike our rowdy and excitable little Susie who, as I write this, is sitting on the grass beside me, waiting for something to bark at. Buzzle was seldom roused except by the prospect of a walk, and then, the moment one took one's hat off the peg by the front door, or gave some other unmistakable sign of what was coming, he had the reprehensible habit of standing erect and thrusting with great force with his forepaws against one's legs; and, as he was extremely heavy and one's knee-joints are so constructed that they bend only one way, this could be painful. Susie, today, always goes on a lead till we are off the road; but we did not bother about a lead with Buzzle, even though motor traffic was, by this time, fairly frequent. But Buzzle was good at traffic; partly, I suppose, his deliberate movements protected him, while his whiteness and bulk made him conspicuous and suggested to hasty

motorists that any damage which resulted from a collision might not be always on one side. At a house we once occupied in Dorset, the garden of which was bounded by a busy main road, we used to find Buzzle sometimes *lying* in the road, apparently asleep, while passing cars and lorries eddied round him like the current of a stream around an island. But we disapproved of this, and would severely call him in.

He loved his walks—what dog doesn't? And of course came with us everywhere. Day after day in summer it was over the fields and down the steep little path to the stile, where we would leave Anne's push-chair, and proceed—Anne walking when she could and being carried when she couldn't—over the broken and rolling knolls, covered with bramble and bracken, to the sea at Puckaster, which, in those days, we considered as *our* beach—and so it was, almost, for few others used then to bathe in the small sandy cove between the rocks and stones. Or perhaps, when the children were older, we would go round the point to the westward, where there is a stretch of sand half a mile long, and, at low tide, a lagoon of warm and shallow water bounded by rocks at its seaward edge, very good for small swimmers and toy boats. Not that Anne, or Lesley either, needed the lagoon for long; for both became strong swimmers at an early age, and many is the time I remember watching them in and out of the sea for a whole summer's day, while they laughed at me for getting chilly so soon.

Buzzle bathed too, and his manner of doing so was so deliberate, old-gentlemanly and cautious that I always felt he must be taking a dip not for pleasure, but for his health. He never swam. He walked in—on calm days only—very slowly, until the water reached his stomach; then he would lower himself quietly down till it covered his back, lie thus,

like a hippopotamus, for a minute or two, and then return to dry land for a shake. Once in the day was quite enough; the rest of the time he would spend gravely patrolling the sand (with just a touch of anxiety, perhaps, when Lesley and I went rock-walking further than usual), or sitting by us at lunch-time snapping at wasps, which he caught on the wing and swallowed with apparent relish.

In summer it was hard not to go to the beach; but at other times of the year walks for Buzzle, with me or Rosalind or both, would be further afield. Nutkins stands some three hundred feet above sea-level, but the downs which encircle it are higher, so we are placed, as it were, in the middle of a large shallow saucer. Between the trees, as you stand in the garden, you can see the line of downs in most directions against the sky: High Hat to the eastward beyond the dell, over the rim of which the morning sun first looks into our bedroom window; the run of low hill to the southward, caught in broken glimpses through the branches of the crooked Spanish chestnut, where the missel thrushes sometimes build, and, away to the west, past the huge old ilex, which yearly litters the fresh spring garden with its innumerable small brown pointed leaves, the swelling arc of St Catherine's, with the Pepper Pot on top and the stump of the disused lighthouse. All these bare grassy hills are good for dogs or men to walk on, and I mention them here because they belong to Nutkins' garden as much as the sky belongs to the rose, or the moon to the tree through the branches of which it shines.

From the summit of High Hat the cliff drops sheer for a couple of hundred feet to the Undercliff. Lying here on the edge, one looks down on to the tops of trees and the backs of rooks which float past like black fish swimming in the stream of air; while southward the vast dazzle of the sea tilts sharply up to the descending sky. But I avoid the edge

when I go with a dog that way—this may be an ungrounded fear. I do not know. Dogs are sure-footed and not fools; but I cannot help wondering what might happen if one of them started a rabbit hereabouts, and lost his head. So I don't take any risks.

I have often asked people if they know the Island, and they have replied: 'Oh, yes, I went to Shanklin once, about ten years ago.' And then they shut up—I presume from tact, lest they should hurt my feelings. But they would do better to go somewhere else as well—and not necessarily to Sandown. For the truth is that for miles and miles the country is still as lonely as Eden—and prettier, for there is nothing in untamed nature as beautiful as the hill-top prospect of fields and hedgerows, such as one gets from the Pepper Pot on St Catherine's. Over St Catherine's was one of Buzzle's favourite walks, as it was, and still is, one of my own. I suppose Buzzle liked it both because it was longish, and because of the rabbits. Buzzle was the only one of our dogs, in spite of the fact that he was by far the slowest and portliest, ever to catch rabbits. It is a distressing habit, and I think he guessed that we deprecated it; for on one occasion—it was not in the Island—he and Rosalind were walking together along a narrow lane between high hedges, when a young rabbit incautiously popped into sight. Buzzle was on him in a flash, and his mistress, passionately defending the weaker, sprang forward with the walking-stick she was carrying and gave Buzzle a resounding thwack. To her dismay Buzzle sank to the ground, and for a dreadful moment Rosalind thought she had injured him, and even that he was going to die. Presently, however, he got to his feet again, though with difficulty and pain. He could barely crawl. They were a long way from home—and I was not there. Filled with remorse Rosalind took Buzzle (he weighed a ton) in her

arms, and started to stagger homeward, sure she would never get there under such a weight. However, she need not have worried; for she had hardly carried Buzzle a hundred yards when, exhausted with her burden, she lowered him carefully to the ground. Thereupon he came to life again, and trotted briskly along beside her without the smallest sign of discomfort.

'Oh, Buzzle,' Rosalind exclaimed, with as much amusement as relief, 'you old fraud!'

Buzzle is not the only person in the world who has sought to regain sympathy by feigning distress.

To go up to the Pepper Pot one turns right past Niton farm into the sunk lane, which in old days used to be the carriage-way between Niton and Chale. It is much grown-in and very rough under foot, the brown earth having been washed away by rains from the underlying stones. In all but wintriest weather it is hot and airless in the lane, and one climbs slowly, the dog padding along at one's heels and stopping every now and again to sniff up at the steep banks, or impatiently pushing past one's legs to lead the way. Then the track opens out, and there are wide fields stretching away on one's left to the edge of the cliff, and, to the right, the green shoulder of St Catherine's Down. At this point I like best—and so do the dogs—to leave the track and wriggle under a rickety wire fence on to the broad back of the hill. The grass is grey-green and tussocky, and nearly always dry; if it happens to be westerly and blowing weather, the wind here is so strong that it makes one's eyelids flicker, and if there are white clouds on a clear sky, looking up at the rounded edge of the false summit a hundred feet above, one feels that the hill itself is reeling. Half-way up this first slope I like to stop, not only to get my breath, but because I know that behind me a slip of shining sea will have risen up in a dip of the cliff's

undulating edge, a narrow slip which broadens and extends as I climb higher.

It is the rarest thing to meet another walker on these hills. The dogs and I have them to ourselves—apart from the rabbits, the invisible larks, a few rooks or daws drifted inland from the face of the cliff, and (though this has been Rosalind's luck, not mine) a pair of foraging peregrines. Higher up, along the gentler slope above the first steep shoulder of the hill, there are sometimes cows, patiently looking for what they can find between the windblown, stunted bramble-bushes. This is unfortunate for Rosalind, when she happens to be with us; for Rosalind has never yet been able to warm towards a cow. She has a deep suspicion of them, and is always afraid that they may, like the cow which Dorothy Wordsworth wrote of in her journal, 'give over eating' and *look* at her. She is convinced, moreover, that the presence of a dog maddens them and is bound to lead to a dreadfully contracting circle of furious horns. Not that this has ever actually occurred: indeed, Buzzle's effect upon cows was purely negative. They ignored each other; and Susie, today, who, though she will ignore a single cow, is a little uncomfortable when she meets a herd, far from irritating them, makes herself as inconspicuous as possible, lowering her tail, quickening her pace, and taking a wide detour to avoid them. Many a time Rosalind and I have started out with one of the dogs for an evening stroll across Jackson's field to the fuzz where the bracken and bluebells grow, but have got no further than the first stile.

'Cows,' says Rosalind, and stops dead.

'They're quite all right,' I answer, knowing from experience that whatever I say will make no difference. 'Anyway, you can't mind them if *I'm* with you.'

'*Can't* I!' says Rosalind. And, alas, she can.

St Catherine's Hill is the highest point in the Island,

run close by Boniface behind Ventnor. Right on the summit stands the Pepper Pot, the remains of an old chantry with a romantic history which I cannot repeat here. By it, within a hundred yards, is the base of the original lighthouse for St Catherine's Point—looking now like the Martello towers one sees along the Channel coast to the eastward. Stand by the Pepper Pot, and you will know indeed that you are on an island. Your eyes will tell you—north-west, north and north-east the Solent and Spithead, thin lines of shining water in the dips of the hills, and all to the southward and westward the unbroken expanse of the sea.

But my favourite place on this hill is a little distance beyond the Pepper Pot, just where the ground falls steeply away in the direction of Chale. There is a little hollow here, lined with that very thick-growing, fine grass which is as soft as down and always dry, where there is shelter from the wind and even the early April sun is hot on one's head. Many a time with one or other of the dogs by my side, or questing in the brambles nearby, I have sat here looking and listening: listening to the dry rustle of the wind in the grass, the ubiquitous larks whose song, like light dissolved in sound, seems to fill the great bowl of air, or come 'a-dropping from the sky' as in the Ancient Mariner's dream, and the distant talking of rooks down in the trees at Chale; and looking at the coloured country, the russet, or fawn, or brown, or green-flushed fields under the rim of downs which march westward to Freshwater, the few clumps of trees, the rare farm-house, the blood-red cliffs of Brook and Chale, the pearl-white cliffs beyond—and always the shimmer of the sea and the immeasurable sky. Those white cliffs, and the Needles themselves, savage rocks diminished by distance to small and milky stones, are as insubstantial as the sea and air; earth and sea not only meet but mingle; they are a single element,

and even geology has spoken the truth—the Island is *Anadyomene.*

I have spoken of Buzzle as a dog of eminently placid and gentlemanly temper, as indeed he was when he reached years of discretion; but, like the rest of us, he had a lesson or two to learn during his youth. For one thing, he chased sheep. Now farmers seldom distinguish between a dog who chases sheep for fun, as Buzzle did, and a dog who chases them with evil intent—one farmer, indeed, once threatened to shoot our most innocent Susie (who has been known to refuse to pass a goat) if ever we took her over a certain field off the lead. All the same, dogs ought not to chase sheep; it is a most reprehensible habit, though I for one entirely sympathize with their desire to do so. The prospect of seeing the foolish creatures pick up their skirts and go scuttering off in their stiff-legged, maiden-ladyish way, making their idiot noise, must be almost irresistible. Nevertheless the impulse must be quelled, and we quelled it in Buzzle with great success, when he was still very young. This was almost the only bit of real, efficient training we have ever managed with any animal. It was very simple, and I have no doubt that proper dog-owners (should they accidentally find themselves reading these words) will smile at me in a pitying sort of way for troubling to mention it. We took Buzzle deliberately into a field full of sheep, and walked him up and down amongst them, first on a lead, and then (nervously) off it, telling him constantly in admonitory tones to keep to heel, and roaring at him in sudden panic and rage when he showed signs of darting away. Up and down, up and down we went, until the poor dog was sick to death of it, and of sheep too; and he never afterwards made any attempt to chase them.

There were two things, however, which Buzzle never learned to treat becomingly: men with sacks, and motor

bicycles. There was a man with a sack, I remember—I believe it contained *boots*—who used to pass our house at Clayesmore at regular but infrequent intervals; Buzzle could not endure him, and on one occasion (this was dreadful and I blush to record it) he tore a hole in his trousers. It is highly embarrassing when one's dog tears a hole in a man's trousers; one never really knows what to do about it: one cannot offer the man a new pair, for that is not, at the moment, the point. The only thing is abject apology; but—and this is the real difficulty—the man has been scared; he is angry and thinks your dog is a low, savage, ill-trained brute, which of course he isn't, and this misconception makes you, too, angry and resentful; and anger and resentment make it impossible to apologize with proper sincerity and self-abasement.

'I'm sorry,' you say frigidly. 'But,' you would like to add, 'surely you can see that practically any dog would go for a man like you.'

When we got our first car, Buzzle was delighted. He loved it. Indeed he was much fonder of it than I was; for I have never cared for cars. He would always get in, if he could, when it was left standing at the door, or, if he could not, he would lie along the running-board, to make sure that he would not be left behind. The actual driving he enjoyed too; he used to curl up on the floor at the back, and, though he occupied a good deal of space, it did not much matter, as his imperturbable temper allowed us to pile almost anything, including feet, on top of him.

JUST A FEW CATS

Wuzzy's death left a gap which was never really filled until the arrival of Fudge, who is with us today. Of the many cats we had in the long intervening years, some were, indeed, beautiful and well loved—like Smut, for instance, who attached himself exclusively to Rosalind and allowed himself to be dressed by Anne in doll's clothes and pushed about in a pram. He was killed by a car, and we found his body tossed over the garden wall, presumably by some passer-by; some were eccentric, like Vailes, who had a passion for chimneys: she would climb on to the roof of a house we occupied at Shillingstone in order to inspect them. She used to peer down with intense curiosity, and even, on two occasions, *went* down, like a chimney-sweep in reverse. On the first occasion we were in the sitting-room, before the fire, which was burning brightly, and suddenly, in a swish of soot and a cloud of smoke, this peculiar cat shot down the chimney, sprang across the blazing coals, and hid herself, unhurt, under the sofa. I do not know if she, or we, were the more astonished. Her other venture was less spectacular but possibly even more dangerous: this time it was the

dining-room chimney she descended; the fire was not alight, but she managed in her swift and slithering passage to close the damper right down, so that there she was, stuck, unable either to get down into the grate or to ascend again into the upper air. Her cries called our attention to her; but it was an awkward job to get her out, for when I pushed up the damper (a sort of iron flap with a hinge) upon which the cat was standing, I naturally pushed her up with it and came near to squashing her against the side of the flue. Then there were the poor relations, to whom I have already referred—like Mouse, and his enemy Owl, with the crinkled ear; and, lastly, an indeterminate number of firm, satisfactory tabbies without any particular distinction.

And yet, no sooner are those words out of my mouth than I am conscious of ingratitude. One at any rate of those tabbies I must not treat so meanly, though I have nothing either remarkable or amusing to relate of him. Indeed, Gerald was by no means a remarkable cat, or amusing either; he was just a dear, like quite a number of other people I know. Friendship and affection are much too mysterious in their origin to be explained by reasons. We were both *fond* of Gerald, and that was that. I have in my mind a vivid picture of him in his infancy: Lesley, aged twelve perhaps, is on the lawn at Nutkins by the round rose-bed with its border of pinks, squatting on her heels, the ribbon gone from one of her pigtails (very long pigtails and so fair that they are almost silver rather than gold), while with one hand she pulls daisies from the grass and with the other holds a kitten tightly to her chest. She appears to be talking to herself, for her sister, lying propped on her elbow a few yards away, is not listening.

Lesley unpins the kitten carefully from her chest, and holds him out in both hands, her arms extended.

'Anne,' she says, 'what shall we call *this* one, Anne?'

But still she seems to be talking to herself rather than to Anne.

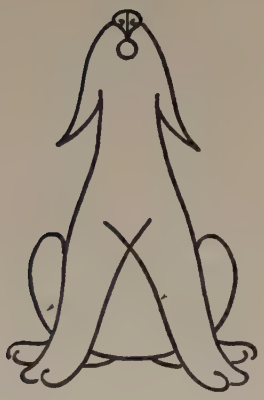
'Fitz!' she says softly, still contemplating the kitten with grave eyes. And then again: 'F-fitz——'

Anne, occupied with her own thoughts, takes no notice, and at last, 'Fitzgerald Edward,' says Lesley; *'that's* your name.'

Then she puts him on the grass, and he laboriously starts off for nowhere in particular, minute pointed tail erect, arms and legs splayed wide.

Gerald was killed by a motor bicycle when he was not much more than a year old. Rosalind was away at the time. He was a confiding little animal and made no secret of his affection for us. Often today, when I am poking about on top of the bank where the moonlight of the parsley used to shine and where now the daffodils grow thick in spring, I come upon the place where I buried him, marked by a small circle of stones in the straggling grass.

I will say no more of the poor relations and indeterminate tabbies, though all of them gave us pleasure in their time. I warm to them still when I remember them lying about in heaps on the sofas and chairs; for they were a clannish lot and had a strong mutual regard. 'Oh,' cried a friend of ours once, upon entering the sitting-room, 'what a nice *clot* of cats!'



SALLY AND GEORGE

At Iwerne in Dorset where I worked for some years there lived, just over the way from the school, a lady who kept kennels for breeding Shelties. Anne, who was then about thirteen, quickly made friends with this neighbour and spent all the time she could get, or spare from her pony, in helping with the dogs. The result was that she was offered, not long afterwards, a Sheltie puppy as a reward for her services.

Sally was five weeks old and we were at Nutkins when she arrived, after a solitary journey much too full of alarms and difficulties for anyone so extremely young and inexperienced. We met at Ryde the steamer on which she was supposed to be travelling; but she was not there. We met the next, and still there was no sign of her. Home again for the second time—and in great anxiety—Rosalind suggested that Sally might by some mistake have found her way into the train at Ryde station, and be waiting for us at Ventnor. To Ventnor, therefore, we promptly went, and asked the stationmaster if he had a dog in a hamper, addressed to de Selincourt.

'No dog,' said the stationmaster. 'But I *have* got a guinea-pig.'

Then, leading us to where the hamper, a very big one, lay waiting in the luggage office, he peeped again through a slit in the lid.

'Well,' he admitted, 'I suppose it *might* be a dog.'

Sally was, indeed, so very small, that the stationmaster's error was not difficult to understand. The poor little mite was also very hungry and exhausted when she was lifted from the hamper and set tenderly down on the sitting-room carpet; but adoration is a good medicine for most living creatures, including ourselves, and Sally quickly gathered strength. That night Anne, casting about for a suitable bed, finally decided upon her doll's cradle, trimmed in pink satin; and in this she tucked Sally snugly up and put her to sleep by her own bed in the night-nursery.

Talking of adoration, I feel I must make it clear that I was referring to Anne, Lesley and Rosalind. My own experience in these matters has been somewhat different from theirs. Now this is a delicate subject and not at all easy to explain; but the fact is that, in my masculine and egocentric way, I have always received a trifle frigidly both the proposal to acquire, and the actual arrival of, a new animal in the family. I foresee consequences—ties, responsibility, expense. Of course, having a female cat one must make up one's mind to kittens; that goes without saying—but why be quite so kind and welcoming to Fluff when she, a stranger, just hopped in through the nursery window? And, having Buzzle, why get another puppy—and a bitch at that? Was it not unwise? Clearly, it was; but then neither Rosalind nor Anne nor Lesley had, in those days, any wisdom at all, while I myself, though wise, was weak. Nor was my weakness the only trouble; for, though I have never had a tenderness for either cats or dogs in an abstract, or general, or inclusive way, I have nevertheless very often, if not always, after a few months of intimate

acquaintance with a particular cat or a particular dog, become inconveniently attached to him. That, however, is by the way; the important thing is that Sally got her adoration from the instant of her arrival at Nutkins, and kept it till her death fourteen years later.

Sally was a tricolour Sheltie—black back, white chest and paws, and sundry delicate flecks of tan above her eyebrows and about her legs. She had a rather short muzzle (too short for the experts but long enough for us), the softest imaginable domed forehead, and what the children used to call target eyes. She was excessively feminine: she possessed, that is, every grace and charm, and concealed under the most yielding and amenable exterior a flinty determination to get what she wanted. Not that she ever had much trouble in doing so, except, perhaps, when she was supposed to be locked in an upstairs room to keep her from the gallant and growing company of suitors which used to place themselves in strategic spots about the lawn and flowerbeds, growing hourly more bilious with hope deferred. But even this difficulty she managed to get over —though I believe only once. Of course, Buzzle was devoted to her, and she jauntily reciprocated his regard. She was also very fond of the cats and kittens, and in her games with them was no less inventive than they were: we still have a photograph of her engaged in the best of them, which consisted in towing a rag round and round the rosebed in the middle of the lawn, with a couple of cats trying to catch it.

Sally's only domestic defect was her dislike of music, especially of the more vigorous and tonic kind (I mean tonic in the medical, not the musical sense), such as Bach's. Anne's violin, too, she found excruciating. This was often tiresome, because both our daughters were much occupied with music during those years, and both found it difficult

to remember to put Sally upstairs in a bedroom before they began to practise—perhaps because they hoped (so oddly are we constituted) that just for this once Sally might not mind. But the hope was never fulfilled; a couple of bars was always enough to make Sally lift her head, purse her mouth into a small round 'O,' and howl. This would continue for a minute or two, when Lesley—or Anne, as the case might be—would leap from the piano-stool and thrust Sally out of the door; whereupon, as often as not, she would scuttle into the garden, sit down under the window from which the music issued, and howl again. Lesley—then very young—had a piece of her own composition, called *Sally is a Dogling*, sung, with piano accompaniment:

Sally is a dogling,
A dogling, a dogling;
Sally is a dogling,
And very fond of me.

To perform this piece suddenly and *con brio* at any moment of the day was the best possible way of getting rid of father.

After Buzzle died, Sally was mated at the kennels where she was born. Of her two puppies one—George—we kept, and the other—Jinny—went for a year or two to a friend of ours at Bryanston, and then found a permanent home for the rest of her long life with Anne and her husband Tony. I mention Jinny particularly, because of what was to occur later.

For nine years Sally and George were the closest of companions. I associate them in my memory chiefly with Bryanston—partly, perhaps, because during the war, which took up the greater part of George's life, we were unable to come regularly to Nutkins as we had always done before. It was Rosalind, in those days at Bryanston, who took them

for their walks, and I think she enjoyed them as much as the dogs did, strolling often for hours through the hanging woods behind our house, and listening, perhaps, in early spring for the first chiff-chaff of willow-warbler, and watching for the squirrels and the other creatures which by then she had begun to love, while the dogs quested about amongst the fallen leaves of innumerable past summers; or going across the playing-fields to the river, where wild daffodils and iris grew along the bank, while George, with his wonderful speed and grace, sped far and far away, and little Sally panted after him; or, again, over the wide bare downs, which are so like our downs here at Nutkins, and on which there was always the chance that George might start a hare, and streak after him for miles in vain. Once on those downs—alone without the dogs—I saw seven hares together: all mad, for it was March. They were gambolling like kittens, but with a swiftness of movement almost unbelievable; if I looked away for a moment, and then looked again, there they were, still weaving the circles of their dance, but half a mile from the spot where they had been an instant before.

Undoubtedly Rosalind enjoyed those walks; but she never much enjoyed the five or ten minutes which preceded them. At these times, George, always an excitable beast, became hysterical. All dogs know when a walk is imminent, but George knew long before that: his mistress had only to think to herself that it was about time to go out, and her thought was instantly communicated to George. This would not have mattered if George had merely been pleased; but the effect upon him had little resemblance to pleasure. The poor dog promptly went off his head; he trembled all over and, with his nose pressed to the door, set up a sort of gibbering whiffle which continued, crescendo, until Rosalind was ready to start. Again and again she would try to

circumvent him by shutting him up somewhere for those last ten minutes and making her preparations in awful silence, walking on tiptoe, breathing softly, and not daring to *think*. But she never succeeded: the gibbering whiffle invariably began long before she was ready, growing every moment in volume and punctuated by sharp cries and slashes at the door, until at last the door was opened and George shot out, knocking Sally flying and, very often, nearly upsetting Rosalind herself. And yet, on other occasions, no dog I have known could maintain an attitude of almost hieratic and Egyptian calm so well as George, as he crouched on the sitting-room carpet by the fire, his noble black head held high, and a kitten, as likely as not, between his paws; like Cleopatra between the paws of the Sphinx.

Sally remained with us after Anne, her original mistress, left home to be married. She died after a short illness, the only one in her long life, on the very eve of our leaving Bryanston and coming to Nutkins for good. I have never known either man or animal so unwilling to die as Sally was. Very near the end she showed great anxiety to go into the garden; Rosalind lifted her and carried her out, and put her gently down on the path just beyond the wicket-gate, where so many of her walks had begun. For an instant Sally forgot her sickness; she started down the path, then stopped and looked back, to see if Rosalind was following. Then her legs failed her, and she could not stand. We laid her on the couch in my study, and for many hours gave her what alleviation we could, though that was not much. At last her breathing became heavy and difficult, and Rosalind went out of the room. I was left alone with her. It was then that her struggle to live began. I have never seen anything like it. Most animals yield to death. George, who had died only a month before, made no resistance, and I had to listen hard to know if he was

breathing still; but Sally fought, indignant at the coming dark. She drew her breaths almost fiercely in, each one more slowly and with increasing labour. One more . . . one more . . . and then, with all her remaining strength, the last.

Rosalind opened the door and looked in; but I shook my head, and she closed it again, softly.

THE END OF AN EPOCH

SALLY's death, following so closely upon George's, was the end of an epoch for us. The double loss was deeply distressing for both of us, especially for Rosalind who, I think, loved Sally better than any other dog or cat we have ever had. And she had been with us for nearly fourteen years. But other circumstances, besides the breaking of an old association, combined to make this moment the end of an epoch: in the first place we had, just then, no cats at all, the old line having gradually died out; and, in the second, we were, as I have already indicated, about to settle at Nutkins for good. We left Bryanston the very day after Sally's death, nominally for a sabbatical term which I felt was due to me after more than twenty-five years of teaching; but I admit there was already the germ of an idea, sprouting in both our minds, that the period might perhaps be extended. The time—1946—happened to be propitious for the writers of books; for books being just then almost the only commodity to be found in the shops, people were reduced to buying them, on the theory, I suppose, that one must buy something. They even bought mine, and after a month or two at Nutkins the prospect looked so rosy that I (who have never foreseen the future with very great accuracy) decided to prolong my leave indefinitely. I wrote to the school and resigned my job, trying hard in my letter

to express a proper regret, and settled down with a sigh of relief to be, at last, my own master—and, of course, to begin working harder than ever.

Thus Nutkins became, for the second time, our home.

I shall never forget the appearance of the garden when we arrived. It was the beginning of August, and the tenants who had occupied the house for some weeks in our absence, had planted the garden on their arrival but had been unable to maintain it. However, this was not as dreadful as it sounds, in spite of the mess. In previous years—before the war—the garden had always been a problem, once we had begun to go away for school terms; what we did then was to engage some man (for old Jolliffe, alas, was dead) whose supposed duty was to come in for four hours a week and keep down the worst of the weeds. But this arrangement never really worked. Perhaps we had underestimated the time needed for the job. However it was, we used to find that most of our holiday was occupied in purely destructive labour: all we could hope for was to reduce a small patch of wilderness to some semblance of order, so that next time we came that same wilderness would not be wilder still. It was disheartening.

But now, on our return after the war, the position was different. Now, however wild the garden had grown, what did it matter, as we had all our lives to work in it, bringing it back deliberately, unhurriedly, to what it ought to be—yes, and making it more beautiful than before?

And the garden was wild indeed. Have you ever *seen* a forsaken garden? Seen it, I mean, not as a gardener prosaically sees it, but with a sudden, detached, disinterested eye? Ours at that moment was not by any means the ghost of a garden like the one which Swinburne described—there was no strange altar there upon

which death lay dead; on the contrary, it was fuller of life than any garden I have ever been in. Lesley was with us (no pigtails now! She was a young woman and taller than her mother), and I remember standing with her one sunny morning by the rickety old half-fallen arch over which the American Pillar triumphantly climbs; we were looking across towards the dell, and suddenly she exclaimed: 'Isn't it *pretty!*'

And it was, though she said it half incredulously. Everything had fantastically grown, as though the garden had been sprinkled with the Food of the Gods. The grass on the lawn was a foot high, and in seed. No earth was visible anywhere: only a tangle of enormous vegetables, broad beans six feet high thrusting up amongst the apples on the boughs, cabbage stalks as thick as saplings, coltsfoot, nettles, carpets of speedwell, towering thistles in beds and paths, each indistinguishable from either, buttercups and dandelions in hosts—gay armies without a commander—the apple trees so grown that the branches, loaded as thick as currants with apples, battled with each other across paths and drooped low in arches to stop us passing: bindweed everywhere, turning the evening primroses into tents of vivid green, sucking the life that was too strong to kill. And then the colour: the American Pillar blazing, the sweet peas, all in a tangle, half propped, half fallen, but still smothered in flowers; the evening primroses shining through the green, the warm orange of the montbretia just bursting into flower, the apples themselves already flushing to red and gold. There had never been so many apples: all day long the Beauty of Bath was full of blackbirds and starlings, gorging on the fruit. It was no gardener's garden, to be sure; there were no 'trim little scholars' there like the flowers in Meredith's poem,

trained to stand in rows and asking if they please;

but there were flowers, right enough, gay and savage in their uncontrolled violence and intensity of life: flowers, and fruit, and the happy birds.

Of course we set to work. We all three worked as hard as we could go, day after day, tearing out the thistles, searching deep for the roots of bindweed, making war upon coltsfoot and buttercup and speedwell, cutting from the ilex new timbers for the arch under the American Pillar, slashing at the lawn with a riphook until our wrists ached. And all the time the blackbirds and starlings ate themselves sick on the Beauty of Bath and the little, sweet, red apple, whose name I do not know, but which has always been their favourite. We would find them sometimes on the path under the tree on which this apple grows, gorged so fat and sleepy that we almost trod upon them.

We spoiled our wild Eden of a garden; we almost stripped it bare. But it was joyous work, for now, at last, time was our own; there would be no going away now with the work half done, no sickening certainty that even what was done would be undone again. Year by year now, summer and winter, we could go on to make of the garden what we wanted it to be. We were happy in the prospect; and the birds were happy too, for there were no cats. No cats, no dogs, no children—for Anne had already been seven years married, and Lesley was about to begin work in London: it was an unfamiliar situation for Rosalind and me. A little empty, perhaps; but we were free—or thought we were.

THE HUT

WHEN we first came to Nutkins there was, at the top end of the garden between the Beauty of Bath (then a mere sapling) and the dirty old shed which we now dignify by the name of the garage, a chicken-run. It was here, of course, that we kept those low hens I spoke of. A chicken-run is an eyesore in any case; but when, growing wiser, we got rid of the hens, and the run became not only hideous but also useless, we felt that we could tolerate it no longer. The question was: what could we do with it?

One day, when Anne was about seven and we were looking at the chicken-run with our usual distaste—the dreary, dusty oblong, seven yards by six, littered with bird-droppings and emergent stones and enclosed with wire-netting rather the worse for wear, and the ramshackle hen-house in the corner—Rosalind suddenly had an idea, and saw (as her way is) the future in the instant.

'Why didn't we think of it before?' she cried. 'It will make a perfect house for Anne—she'll simply love it!'

'The *hen*-house?' I muttered. 'It's a bit dirty, isn't it?'

Rosalind shot me a swift glance, and hurried on, all alight with creative enthusiasm. 'And the run will be the garden—*Anne's* garden, her very own. Look, we'll make a hedge here, and this will be the lawn (that'll be easy), and we'll have beds round it on three sides, and a rose-tree in the middle. And the house will have a round table, two small chairs, and a dresser.'

'A dresser?' I echoed.

'A dresser—to hold her dolls' tea-service, with hooks for the cups.'

Evidently Anne's house and Anne's garden were already complete. Nothing remained—except to make them.

Now I admit to a certain obstinacy and pigheadedness when I am confronted with a large and imaginative scheme. I see difficulties, and usually mention them; this time, however, I did not mention them, even if they existed, for it was obvious, even to me, that Rosalind's idea was a good one.

We set to work on Anne's house without delay, and the thing was done: not, to be sure, in five minutes, but as quickly as we could. I got in some timber, and, as I am a happy though inexpert carpenter, the building was great fun. We closed in the open sides of the hen-house, fitted windows, made a window-seat under one of them, and furnished the interior more or less according to plan, not forgetting the dresser, which we painted bright blue. The garden, too, gradually took on shape. Old Jolliffe, who was still working for us in those days, cut some slips of privet, shoved them in along the edge by the Beauty of Bath and told us they would grow, as indeed they did; I made the little lawn (one of my favourite tasks), digging deep into the rubbish and dust and carting away the protruding stones; and the rose tree was planted in its own small circular bed in the middle of it.

When Anne was formally presented with her house and garden, she was not particularly interested in either. But this did not matter much, because Rosalind and I continued to be interested in both. The garden grew prettier year by year, and, when Jolliffe's hedge grew higher and thicker, and the rosemary bushes which we planted along another side of the lawn began to close up together, it became, as it were, a garden within a garden, with a sort of secrecy about it which was very delightful. We used it often to sit in and admired it always, and now and then invited—or compelled—Anne herself to take tea with us in her own house, together with Lesley and the dolls. But, as time went on, the pretence that it *was* Anne's house and Anne's garden became too thin to be kept up any longer.

Rosalind, accordingly, had another idea. It was quite a simple one: to transform, namely, Anne's house into the Hut—*our* Hut.

Now I must explain that the house stood in the angle made by the wall of the garage and the wall of our neighbour's potting-shed. It faced south, and was thus protected from all winds between north and east. Everyone knows that in March, and often even as early as February, there are days when the sun is warm enough to bask in, if only one can find shelter from the bitter wind which makes the garden intolerable for any purpose except work. This being so, would not the Hut give us just the shelter we required, and enable us on many a chilly spring day to be out of doors instead of huddling over the study fire? Evidently, it would. So, once again, I set to work: I took out the whole of the front wall of the house, leaving it open to the southward (towards Jolliffe's privet hedge, now growing thick and strong, and the Beauty of Bath), and the upper half of the wall towards the west. I then deepened and extended the whole thing by about four feet, carrying forward the roof

and the floor, to give more room, and made a movable screen to fill up the open half of the west wall in rainy weather.

There, then, was the Hut, an admirable place to work or laze in when the rest of the garden was too draughty or cold, and—most important of all—with sufficient space in it to take two camp beds. For it soon occurred to us that, as the best times in a summer garden are dusk, midnight and dawn—times when a garden reveals all sorts of secrets which are veiled from the light of common day—the obvious way of enjoying them properly was to sleep in the Hut. This we did, and have continued to do so ever since from late May or early June to the beginning of October, or whenever it may be that the equinoctial gales begin.

There are plenty of mornings in early May when, after a frost in the night, just enough to whiten the grass on the lawn a little, a fresh north-easter makes a chilly world in spite of the fact that the pear blossom is falling. On such a morning it is cold indoors and the rooms have no feeling of life in them. I cannot help it, but my sense of propriety is outraged by having to light a fire in the study immediately after breakfast when the daffodils have been dead for a fortnight and our two small azalea bushes are just coming into flower, especially on a sunny morning, when it *ought* to be warm. Am I therefore, since a fire in the study is out of the question, to do my work in the cold? Certainly not—I can do it in the Hut.

In the Hut it is as warm as toast. The tin roof makes it a little oven of just the right temperature, and not one breath of the chilly wind comes in. In front of me is the diminutive lawn freshly mown, bounded by the privet hedge, solid now and about five feet high, behind and over which the Beauty of Bath, in almost full blossom, rises high and spreads wide. In the narrow bed on my left, under the wall

of our neighbour's greenhouse, the sweet peas are three inches tall, and on the fig tree which, though its roots are in our neighbour's garden, spreads more than half of its prodigal branches over the roof of the Hut, the new fruit is just beginning to swell. Three or four looped and straggling branches reach nearly to the ground just where the row of sweet peas begins, and there are already some small green buttons on them, about as big as my little finger-nail, which no doubt will be figs for breakfast for us in the last week of September. They are barely a yard beyond where the foot of Rosalind's bed will be when sleeping-out time comes. She will be able to reach out, after drinking her tea and eating her toast, and pull them.

THE BIRDS

One summer during the war Rosalind was at Nutkins without me. She slept in the Hut as usual, and one morning something happened which was to have far-reaching consequences. 'I had slept rather late'—I quote her own words, as she wrote them in her journal—'and old Mr Morris down the lane had already gone clumping past the garden to fetch his horses from the field; but scarcely anyone else was yet astir, though the birds had come to the end of their dawn chorus, and were hard at work at the prosaic business of hunting for food. I stretched, turned on my side, and opened my eyes. What a surprise! Not six inches off, just level with my nose, sat a small brown bird. He did not move—nor did I. He did not blink—I returned his stare. We kept this up between us for what seemed a long time—actually perhaps it was half a minute—before he moved. But he did not fly away. On the contrary: he hopped upon my chest. I could feel the odd, cold little touch of his claws on my skin, and I cannot express what a strange emotion of pleasure and affection his confidence aroused in me. Soon he turned his back, and began to hop casually about the bed until he reached my feet, when he flew off

into the sweet peas in search of the insects he knew he would find there.'

That, then, began it. The small brown bird which hopped on to Rosalind's chest was a wren. Ever since we first came to Nutkins, wrens have been familiar occupants and sharers of the garden; two of them flew in and out of our bedroom window on our very first morning in the house, before we were out of bed; they have built year after year under the porch or under the thatch of the verandah, and we have constantly watched them with pleasure hopping about like quick little mice amongst the pea-sticks or the bushes. Rosalind, indeed, for years and years had, like me, known wrens very well. But—and this is the point—she had not known *that* wren. Nobody, I trust, needs to be reminded that knowledge which is to be worth anything invariably begins with the particular, never with the general—a reason, perhaps, why children know certain aspects of the world much better than we do: for they see one thing at a time, and see it intensely. Rosalind had seen her wren intensely—*that* wren and no other. 'When a sparrow,' wrote Keats, 'comes before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.' Rosalind also, not to put too fine a point upon it, took part for an instant in the existence of the wren, with the result that she never saw it, or any other, with quite the same eyes again.

The first practical consequence for Rosalind of her meeting with the wren was the realization of the shadowiness of her previous knowledge. 'What,' she said to herself, '*do* I know about wrens, or about any other birds either? Why, I am not even sure if the wrens migrate with the swallows!' Such ignorance was not to be tolerated, and Rosalind, with her characteristic absorption in the task in hand, set about correcting it. She bought books; she watched; she waited; she listened; and step by step she found herself entering

deeper and deeper into a whole new world of interest and delight. It was as if that wren who looked her so fearlessly in the eye and hopped upon her chest in the June morning, had called to her to follow, and she had answered the call.

She has been answering the call ever since, and not of the wren only but of every other bird which she has had the happiness to see. And oh, dear, what a lot she knows! In this branch of knowledge I pant after her in vain; sometimes, in the kindness of her heart, she assumes in me knowledge which I do not possess, so that it is a double humiliation to have to disclaim it. 'There!' she will exclaim, 'can you hear him?'

'Hear who?' I answer, as the bright, loud May-time chorus fills my ears with an indistinguishable medley of sounds.

'*Who?*' says Rosalind, wide-eyed with surprise. 'Why, the willow-warbler.'

I listen hard, trying with all my might to pick out that dying fall of song, which I should indeed recognize if only the thousands of other birds would, for one moment, hold their tongues. But they won't; they sing louder and more bafflingly than ever.

'There he goes,' says Rosalind again, watching my intent and puzzled face. '*That's* him. Surely you heard him that time?'

Well, perhaps I did; but the trouble is that, as always, I heard a great many others at the same time, and at least a dozen of them seemed, for the moment, to have caught something of just the cadence I was trying so hard to distinguish.

Rosalind has a golden rule about knowing birds: to know a bird properly, she says, you must see him sing. It is not enough to see him today and hear him tomorrow; you must do both simultaneously. Then, when at one and the same

instant you have seen his body and heard his song, you will ever afterwards bind the two together in your memory—his form and his spirit—and know him for ever.

It is no wonder, then, that Rosalind enjoyed those walks with Sally and George in the hanging woods at Bryanston, making acquaintance with the nuthatches, cirl buntings, marsh-tits, willow-tits, spotted woodpeckers, and many other birds which haunted them, but to me are mere names, and down by the river with the long-tailed tits and kingfishers, and over the field past the ivied stump where the barn owl used to live. Here at Nutkins, as is to be expected in a village garden, the birds are fewer in kind, and of the sort that even I am familiar with—though this last winter we did have a brief visit from a company of redwings, and once, some years ago, Rosalind had the pleasure of finding the apple tree near the rose-arch suddenly filled with goldcrests, and listened for, I think, the first time in her life to their voices—'like tiny guitars.' The white owl became a particular friend of mine too; his beat brought him constantly to the house at Bryanston where we lived; he used to sit on a post at midday in the sun just beyond the garden fence, and evening after evening we watched him hunting low over the rough grass, until at last he would lift, as if blown softly upward from beneath, and float away over the trees beyond the school. Rosalind envies me because I have twice seen a white owl at Nutkins and she has not; once I saw him near the farmyard by the church, and once, as I was driving home along the Whitwell Road, he suddenly appeared like a ghost out of the hedge and made me jump as he drifted past the windscreen,

wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

I wish that Meredith, so acute an observer of nature, had not been driven by the exigences of his verse in that

beautiful poem from which I have just quoted, to say that the white owl *sweeps* in flight. He does not: his flight gives no such sense of power; it is a floating and drifting, apparently aimless, and almost moth-like in its insubstantiality and lightness. Yet, goodness knows, 'the creature hath a purpose, and his eye is bright with it.'

So linking one thing with another, I like to think that if we had never kept hens; if we had not got sick of the brutes and left their run desolate and useless; if Rosalind had not been inspired to build Anne's house and to plant Anne's garden with the rose tree in the middle; if Anne's interest in her house and garden, never very great, had not dwindled as she grew older to nothing at all; and if, finally, we had not by a second inspiration transformed Anne's house into our Hut, then Rosalind might never have come to know the birds as she knows them today. She might, perhaps, have gained thereby some tranquillity of mind, but she would have lost one of the chief pleasures of her life.

SUSIE

No cats, no dogs, ever again, now that the children were long since grown up, and gone away. That had been our resolve: we would deliberately contract the area in which our feelings were vulnerable; we would live at ease and enjoy our liberty.

I wonder how many people have made a similar resolve, and how many have kept it. We ourselves kept it for about a year.

That we broke it so soon was not our fault; but I have already mentioned that it was our destiny to keep animals, and I can only suppose that it was destiny which was at work again.

The immediate agent of destiny was, in the first instance, Anne. Aware of her mother's grief at the loss of Sally and George, she had privately determined to mitigate it, but by a method exactly the reverse of what we ourselves intended . . . and this is where Susie begins.

Without telling us of her purpose, Anne had Jinny—Sally's daughter—mated and, when she next came to Nutkins for her usual Christmas visit, she brought with her the two puppies, then a couple of months old.

It is now seven years ago, but I remember as if it were yesterday how Anne came into the sitting-room straight from the car with the two little creatures in her arms, one in each hand, held high against her chest, and stood there for a moment looking at her mother over the tops of their heads.

'Well, Mummy,' she said, 'which will you have?'

Rosalind did not answer for a moment; but I, standing somewhat aloof as I always do on such occasions, knew very well what was going on inside her.

'Look, Mummy: *this* one'—Anne raised the puppy in her right hand and pressed it close under her chin—'is exactly like Toots.' Toots was one of Sally's nicknames.

Rosalind nodded. Then she took the miniature Toots into her own arms, and the thing was done. She had succumbed, almost without a struggle. I, of course, muttered and complained for a while, but to no purpose. Susie took up residence.

Anne was right, but only up to a point, when she said that Susie was just like Toots. The colouring was the same, certainly; but she was not smooth, as the infant Sally was: she was hairier and raggeder, and I do not think that anyone, even a stationmaster, could have mistaken her for a guinea-pig. As she grew larger, she became still more ragged and hairy, and her coat was harsh to the touch—quite unlike her grandmother's soft head and silken sides. This was not proper in a thoroughbred Sheltie, and it used to worry Rosalind a little.

'Look,' she would say, 'she's growing a *beard!*' I even fancied now and then that I detected a note of resentment in her voice when she commented upon Susie's beard. Personally I did not object to it at all: indeed, it seemed to me a very good sort of beard, and I could see no reason why Susie should not cultivate it, if she wished to. There was, as may be guessed, a reason for the difference in our

feelings on this matter: Rosalind *wanted* Susie to be 'just like Toots.' Sally, in the years after Anne was married, had been very much Rosalind's own, and the relationship between them had been reciprocal, and deeper than commonly occurs. Clearly, one living creature can never take the place of another—either animal or human; nevertheless there was, I think, a hope in Rosalind's mind during those early days that Sally, or at least a little bit of her, might, in a sense, be reincarnated in Susie. Hence those signs of dismay when, looking at Susie, she found not the small, fine, aristocratic muzzle she had hoped for, not the satiny softness of forehead and chin, but a robustious sort of large face, like a terrier's—and a beard. It was disconcerting. Anyone who has followed me thus far will have no fear that the disappointment lasted very long. Susie soon took the measure of her mistress and was perfectly capable of dealing in her own way with these complexities; and today, though Rosalind has not forgotten Sally, she admires Susie's beard as much as I do.

In my own case Susie had a different problem—though problem is hardly the word to apply to anything she solved with such ease, and without any thought whatever.

To explain this, I must confess something which I have more or less suppressed until now: at any rate I have not deliberately drawn attention to it. The fact is that Susie was the first dog who ever broke down the habitual reserve which I had previously maintained towards her kind. I should like not to be misunderstood in this: I have never lived in any house, from my childhood onwards, which had not a generous supply of dogs and cats, and I would not willingly have been without either. But it was always the cats I preferred. The dogs I tended from my earliest years to take more or less for granted. They were never, so to speak, *my* dogs—though I do not mean that in any narrow,

possessive sense, for Susie herself divides her affections with a rich impartiality between her mistress and me, besides giving a generous share to almost anybody who happens to enter the house. I was fond of them all, without doubt; but my feeling for them was passive rather than active—a kind of benevolent neutrality.

But Susie, little ragamuffin that she was, changed all this. She very soon made it known to me that benevolent neutrality was not good enough.

She set about her work in what seems, in retrospect, a decidedly unpromising fashion. Rosalind had gone up to London, ostensibly to take lunch with a couple of poets; so Susie and I were left alone at Nutkins. It was in January of the dreadful winter of 1947. There was a foot of snow and an iron-hard frost. Susie was about three months old, a gangling loose-legged little animal, just the age to require frequent and regular visits to the garden. But there was a foot of snow in the garden, and if I took Susie out and dropped her into it, she disappeared. Evidently that would not do: it was not kind to Susie, and it did not serve its immediate purpose. But what was the alternative? Clearly, there was no alternative; Susie, quite simply, had to stay in. This would have been disagreeable in any case; but for me at the moment, busy as I was with trying to write a book, it was also excessively inconvenient and disturbing. Half-way through the day I got sick of going into the scullery to fetch a basin of water and a rag—it was abominably cold in the scullery, anyway, and the only tolerable room in the house was the study, where I was keeping a royal fire—so I brought the basin and rag in and kept them handy by the side of my chair. Then I could follow Susie around and mop up at least without getting cold.

How I wished Rosalind had not gone to London! After all, it was *her* dog; I had not even been consulted in the

matter. Didn't she realize that I was *busy*, trying to earn the family's bread and butter? Couldn't she have put off her poets until Susie was a bit older and more continent? The more I brooded upon it, the more resentful I became. Besides, the study carpet, never very beautiful, was becoming every hour more like a leopard skin—and no doubt (I thought bitterly) Rosalind would say when she came home that I had not cleaned it *properly*—that I ought to have used soap and a scrubbing-brush.

The odd thing was that the gloomier I became, the more Susie's cheerfulness increased. She took no notice of my sulks whatever. Obviously, she was having a grand time and enjoying herself immensely. Life for her was a series of larks, not the least of which was my absurd performance with the rag. This was disarming; no feeling of any kind, kindly or otherwise, can really thrive unless it meets with its proper response. I remember, for instance, a certain failure in Rosalind to be as angry as she wanted to be with Anne, when Anne was very young.

'Oh, Anne!' she exclaimed severely.

Anne met her look gaily.

'Are you laughing, Mummy?' she asked.

'*No!*'

'Why not?' Anne replied.

In the same sort of way Susie's insouciance and apparently growing pleasure in the general rightness of things did, to a certain extent, spoil the richness of my gloom. I did my best to keep it up, but, as the long evening wore on, it became more difficult.

Then Susie got on to my lap—I was still trying to write my book, the paper on my knee.

'Beastly little dog,' I murmured.

Susie sighed with satisfaction.

After supper (another glorious lark for Susie: how she

enjoyed it!) I put away my work, made up the fire with three or four fresh logs and settled down for the evening—though still keeping the rag and basin handy. Susie settled down too—in the intervals, so to speak. Much of the time she spent sitting on her bottom with her back legs stretched out straight and parallel in front of her, leaning hard against my shins for support, and blinking luxuriously into the fire. The attitude (which she still frequently adopts) was slightly absurd, and made me chuckle. I do not know if I chuckled out loud, but, if I did, Susie must have taken it for a sign that, after all, I found the world as jolly a place as she did; anyway, she got on to my knees again. She was still too small to jump on, like a real dog: she made one jump, and got half-way, then slithered back to the floor; then she tried again—a tremendous effort, which brought one or two legs more or less on to my lap, while several others trailed behind in all directions, vigorously scrabbling for a hold. Finally she managed it, turned round with a lurch or two, so that her back end was towards my stomach, flopped down with her nose pressed flat between my knees, and—once again—sighed with pleasure. It was a very special sort of sigh—unless, indeed, I romanticize it in retrospect; for it is still characteristic of Susie: she does it today when I pull her ears, or take the silver paper off the chocolate before breaking off her daily square. Nevertheless I think it was the same: the breath held ecstatically back, and then let slowly and luxuriously out in a long-drawn sigh which is, at the same time, half grunt, half snuffle.

'There!' she seemed to say. 'Now we're comfortable. And what did you mean by thinking, even for a moment, that life isn't a lark?'

So when Rosalind came home the following evening and asked me how I had got on, I was able to say, after a rueful glance at the study carpet: 'Quite nicely, thank you.'

SAILING WITH SUSIE

In this chapter I must leave the garden, to describe some small adventures which Susie had elsewhere; for Susie is 'a guy what's travelled,' as a neighbour of ours puts it when he wishes to remind us of his bygone years in Canada.

Susie was still very young when she first came sailing with us in *Herga*. Now I would not recommend anyone to take his dog to sea, if he could avoid doing so; for from almost every point of view the sea is a poor place for dogs. But what can one do? There are, to be sure, kennels which are prepared to take lodgers, and there are some dogs with a philosophical view of things, who will put up with lodging-house life without much distress for a month or so. I believe Buzzle might have done so. Susie, on the contrary, is not made that way at all; deprived of the companionship of her people, surrounded with wire and sawdust, without a single armchair or sofa to lie upon ('Oh, *Susie*, you *know* you're not allowed on the sofa!'), she would, I think, first be indignant, then bewildered, then sad, then apathetic, and finally sink into a settled despondency. We knew she would not enjoy life at sea, but at the same time we were sure she would choose to endure its discomforts in our company rather than be left behind even in the most eligible boarding-house.

However, there is one thing about a month's yachting cruise, which was lucky for Susie; and that is the agreeable fact that, though the object of it is admittedly to sail, one nevertheless spends a good deal of the time *not* sailing. During these interludes Susie was as happy as a sandboy. *Herga* herself she took to at sight, and quite obviously loved; life on board—always provided we were in harbour—suited her down to the ground. For one thing, she had, perforce, to share the cabin at night with her master and mistress, a much more satisfactory arrangement than being boxed up all by herself in the kitchen at Nutkins and left to sleep dull and solitary on her bolster. Actually she shared not only the cabin, but Rosalind's bed as well, and that was even better. Sometimes she would try to share mine; but, as the beds in *Herga's* cabin, though comfortable, were rather narrow, and as I cannot sleep a wink if I have a hot and heavy weight across my shins, I used (selfishly) to give an almighty heave the moment Susie jumped up, and shoot her off again on to the floor. Thereupon, quite unabashed, she would hop up on Rosalind's bed, where she remained till morning. Occasionally, I admit, Rosalind would murmur reproachfully that *she* didn't sleep too well either under such a weight of fur; but she slept better than I did—and in any case she was much more generous and tolerant. Moreover in addition to these delightful nights together, even during the daytime there were no partings, such as are always so grievous to dogs: no goings-out to tea (dogs not invited), no sudden withdrawals into the study to entertain unfamiliar callers (dogs deprecated), no hateful visits to the pictures (dogs barred). Life in *Herga* was marred by no such distressful incidents as these; on the contrary, it was a day-long uninterrupted companionship such as any dog with sense could not but enjoy. Susie adored it. She quickly learned to recognize *Herga* and, rowing off in the

dinghy past the other boats in a crowded harbour, she would stiffen with pleasure the moment *Herga* was in sight. She soon found, too, that some of her favourite shore-pleasures had a very tolerable equivalent on board: the most notable instance of this was motor bicycles. At home, motor bicycles squirting past along the Whitwell Road have always been irresistible to Susie: she chases them at speed with furious barking all down the garden—with, happily, the protecting hedge between; living in *Herga*, she had, of course, no motor bicycles to chase; but motor boats were a good substitute, and, as *Herga* was large and roomy, Susie was able to charge up and down the deck in pretended pursuit of them with a satisfaction hardly less, and just as noisy. And as for walks, she was better off than ever, for instead of the one regular one which she gets at home, it was clearly necessary to take her ashore several times in the course of a day. So what with motor boats to bark at—and sea-gulls; for Susie seemed to have as poor an opinion of sea-gulls as I have of hens—frequent trips ashore in the dinghy, and the unbroken companionship of her people, life for Susie aboard *Herga* was one long lark.

Talking of utilitarian trips ashore, I am reminded of a sad, small incident which occurred not, indeed, on shore, but somewhere out in the middle of Lyme Bay, a good twenty miles from the nearest land. During those first years *Herga* had no auxiliary engine, and during this particular passage (Susie's first) to the West Country we had uncertain weather, with long periods of calm. For thirty hours we were at sea, crawling westward—for us wholly delightful, but not delightful at all for Susie. Virtue in dogs is strong; they are nothing if not decorous beasts; and Susie had learned her lesson of decorum many months before, young as she still was. Poor little dog! We thought she would burst. It was dreadful, and no way occurred to us

of explaining to her that *Herga's* deck was easy to wash with a mop and bucket, and not in any sense sacrosanct like the drawing-room carpet. She held grimly on. Two days and two nights passed; on the third morning we were still lolloping gently along over a calm sea with no land in sight. My brother Bob was on deck, and the topsail, a lovely light sail of soft cotton canvas was lying in a bunch at the foot of the mast, ready to be set. Rosalind and I and Susie were down below.

'*Poor* Susie,' said Rosalind. 'I'm sure she'll be ill.'

Suddenly Susie jumped off the settee where she had been dejectedly sitting and scrambled up the companion ladder to the deck.

We looked at one another in mutual sympathy for her suffering. A moment later there was a cheerful hail from Bob: 'It's all right,' he called, 'Susie has made an immense puddle in the topsail.'

Well, well: the topsail was easily washed, and, as for airing, few things are better adapted to it than topsails.

After that Susie was happier, though she still longed for land. It was only natural that she should hate the sea; for sailing boats not only make unexpected and disconcerting lurches and tumbles, but they are noisy things. Down in the cabin every noise is magnified, and apart from the normal swish and slop of moving water and the creaking of gear, there is, at particular moments such as tacking ship, a violent slatting of canvas, rattle of blocks and clanking of iron on iron, an infernal racket very disturbing to dogs—not to mention the urgent tread of feet as someone goes forward along the deck to tend the head-sail sheets. This was not the world that Susie knew; shut in the cabin, she could not but think, at these recurring moments, that chaos was come again.

One year we took her in *Herga* to St Mawes in Cornwall,

and there, in a safe anchorage a mile or so up the beautiful little river, Bob left us when his holiday was over, so that for three weeks, until our new crew arrived to help us home, Rosalind and Susie and I lived together in great contentment, doing all the things which Susie best enjoyed, walking over the hills and through the woods and the bracken, strolling along the foreshore to collect billets of driftwood, water-worn and smooth, for the cabin fire (for it was a chilly June), or idling up the river in the dinghy to watch, at sundown, the fishermen out in their boats after bass, their lines trailing from two leaning rods, like antennæ, in the stern, or those other fishermen, the herons, standing in the shallow water as motionless as marble and as patient as time. Sometimes we would row up the creek which runs southward below Percueil, land at the head of it and, after a few minutes' walk through scrub, up a steep little track, and over a smooth and grassy hill, come suddenly and surprisingly to the sea, which had seemed so distant from the quiet river where *Herga* lay. On one of these walks we had reached the junction of the creek with the river, when Susie had the ill fortune to see a duck smugly waddling on the mud by the edge of the water some twenty yards below the tide-mark, for the tide was out. Joyfully she sprang towards it, and, at the third leap, almost disappeared in the purple-shining, smooth, treacherous and bottomless mud. I thought I should have to rescue her from drowning, but she struggled back by herself on to firm ground—and what a sight she was! With her thick hair clotted close and four thin purple sticks for legs, she was half the size and a travesty of her gay and carefree self. I am sure the duck laughed; but poor Susie was very far from laughing.

Another place that Susie greatly enjoyed her nautical life in was the Newtown river, here in the Island. During

several summers we spent a week or two in this lovely place, when Bob was not with us—for *Herga* was too big for Rosalind and me to take to sea alone. Susie's adventures in Newtown were much the same as at St Mawes, with one addition—*Shelduck*. *Shelduck* was a little open sailing boat which we bought to amuse ourselves in during those long stays in harbour. Susie at once adopted a proprietary attitude towards *Shelduck;* she loved her, and was a model of good behaviour when we took her for a sail. This surprised us, for in a car Susie is apt to be tiresome and extremely restless, and sailing in *Herga* she was, as I have said, always miserable. But in *Shelduck* she was perfectly at home from the first, settling virtuously down upon the floorboards and hardly ever getting in the way. No doubt her pleasure and contentment were in part due to the fact that a trip in *Shelduck* involved, as a matter of course, a walk ashore; for, as sailing was, for me, more fun than rowing as well as less laborious, we soon got into the habit of using *Shelduck* on every occasion instead of the dinghy.

I suppose it is true that there is little spice to life without variety and change, and that no one could really live happily like a tree, always doing the same things, and very few of them at that. Nevertheless when I look back with a nostalgic eye upon those Junes in the Newtown river, I cannot help feeling that that was the sort of life a man like me was meant to live. Idle? Yes, indeed—that was the whole point of it. Like the thrush in Keats' poem, I have never saddened at thoughts of idleness; on the contrary, such thoughts have always filled me with profound satisfaction. I think it was Thoreau who said he liked a wide margin to his life, and how right he was. I, too, like a wide margin; indeed, I like my life to be almost all margin, so that I can write what comments I please in it, slowly and luxuriously.

The margin was certainly wide during those June days in Newtown. No duties, no compulsions—not even the compulsion of a clock; for though we had a clock on board, we looked at it only out of curiosity, and not very often at that, for we ate when we were hungry and slept when we were tired, and walked or swam when the whim took us. The nearest thing to a duty was Susie's early morning walk on shore—but even to this I must not apply so harsh and dissonant a word. I think it was as agreeable to me as it was to Susie. Early morning is delightful anywhere, except in towns; but surely it was specially delightful in that lonely, hushed and watery place. As I pulled *Shelduck* up alongside *Herga*, Susie used to stand with her forepaws on the rail, quivering with pleasure, her neck craned down as if every moment she was preparing to leap; but she knew that wild plunges into *Shelduck* (or the dinghy) were forbidden, and always waited for me to get in first and to lift her down. Then, while Rosalind prepared breakfast, we would set the sail and slide away to the steep, shingly point at the entrance of the river, where we would land, and walk along the narrow strip of beach and marsh with the Solent on one side and Clamerkin Lake, where *Herga* lay, on the other, watching the ringed plovers scuttling about on the mud and between the stones below the tide-mark, and listening with half an ear to the all-pervading, wild and melancholy cries of the redshanks and oyster-catchers, who, with the curlews and gulls, are the oldest inhabitants and true possessors of this odd angle of land and sea. Sometimes, if I wanted my breakfast, we would go no farther than where the strip of shingle ends; at other times Susie would lure me on past the disused brick-kilns and across the field, which is always ablaze in June with the yellow wax-woden, to the solitary farmhouse on the edge of the low cliff overlooking the Solent. Susie liked this field—partly because she likes any

field, and partly because on one occasion she surprised a family of young partridges in it, and was amused both by the little creatures themselves scampering off in all directions amongst the grasses and by the antics of the mother who did her gallant best to distract her attention. Of course in my anxiety I shouted to Susie to *come here;* but I do not think she would have hurt any of them even if I had not called. Susie, I am glad to say, is less of a hunter than any dog I have known. I have seen a rabbit appear almost under her nose, and she has taken no notice. The only form of sport she really enjoys is stalking invisible moles in a certain field near Nutkins: she approaches her chosen spot with the utmost caution, stepping light as a feather, pauses, stock-still for an instant, with one paw raised, then pounces fiercely—on nothing. Perhaps she inherits this particular quality from her grandmother Sally, who was once actually chased, most ignominiously, by an angry hen-partridge in defence of her brood. Well, never mind: I prefer my dogs not to be too brave.

Then there was the daily visit to the head of the creek, where the boathouse is, to fetch the milk and the letters from the house of a friend of ours in the village, with perhaps a little loitering (for Susie's sake) on the way back across the huge, flat field, where we used sometimes to see meadow-pippits, and always to hear the song of the invisible larks—'a-dropping from the sky.' Or, especially in the evening after supper, we would land from *Shelduck* on the steep gravel beach at the river mouth, and go along the Solent shore to watch the terns, perhaps the most beautiful of all the sea-birds there. They nested on the beach, and we had to walk warily for fear of treading on the eggs which, lying in their little scooped saucer of a nest, were barely distinguishable from the stones. The terns resented our presence, as well they might, and flew round

and round our heads in a flurry of wrath, crying out and diving down at us to drive us away. Then, with the last of the light, we would get into *Shelduck* again and slip back over the quiet water to *Herga*, dropping the sail if the wind had gone and pushing with the heavy oars, but gently, not to disturb the silence. They were memorable evenings for me and Rosalind, and I think for Susie too. At any rate, as she sat on the seat in *Shelduck's* stern, pressed close to Rosalind and upright on her haunches, still as a statue except for her nose which quivered a bit as she sniffed the salt-scented air, she looked contented enough.

MOIRA

WHAT is the use of making resolutions? I have already described how, on our return to Nutkins to settle there for the second time, our resolve to live without responsibilities was shattered by Susie. But Susie was only the beginning.

That same winter the new kitten arrived. She was much the same colour as the remnant of last autumn's leaves, which still lay under the sweet chestnut tree. There she was one morning, all amongst them, chasing and scattering them in a rapture of youth and well-being. She was very pretty—as pretty as Fluff who twenty-five years before had jumped in through the dining-room window. History was repeating itself.

Lesley was with us at the time, and I watched the kitten with as much pleasure as she and Rosalind did; and indeed I can think of few prettier sights than a kitten under a chestnut tree, playing with the leaves. I must have watched her for half an hour at least. Then I turned into the house for something or other, and when I came back a little later, I had a shock. The kitten was no longer playing with the leaves: she was in the drawing-room, drinking milk. I froze at once.

'Why,' I asked, 'did you give her that?'

'She was thirsty,' said Lesley.

The answer did nothing to warm me. It was true, but annoying. Obviously any kitten would get thirsty after rampaging for an hour amongst the chestnut leaves. I was vexed, and my vexation soon found a moral justification.

'You know quite well,' I said, 'that you *ought not* to feed someone else's cat. How would you have liked it if someone had ever fed any of ours, and tried to lure them away from home?'

Rosalind did not answer this. Indeed, she was not listening: she was watching the kitten, who had now finished the milk and was washing her small triangular face with a still smaller and very delicate pink paw.

'Isn't she sweet!' said Lesley—and no doubt she was.

'It's very wrong of you,' I persisted. 'Besides, you know what will happen.'

The moral argument cut no ice whatever with Rosalind, as I might have guessed. Women are better than men, but they are not moral. It was men who invented the moral law—partly, perhaps, because it so often comes in useful.

Rosalind picked the kitten up and held her under her chin. Then she glanced at me.

'Perhaps you'd better take her home,' she said. 'As a matter of fact I know where she comes from.'

'Naturally I'll take her home,' I answered.

Rosalind handed me the kitten, and told me where she lived—down the lane, and not far away.

'Good-bye, Moira,' said Lesley as I opened the door, and the tone of her good-bye sounded in my ears ominously like *au revoir*. I marched out, muttering *'Moira!'* to myself. Moira indeed! What a name!

There is not much use in complaining about the way life

is ordered in this world; and when one is tempted to do so, it is wise to remember the lady who informed Carlyle that she had decided to accept the universe. 'She'd better!' was the grim reply. Nevertheless, how charming it would be if once now and again we could do a deed and avoid the consequences. Not often, of course—but just now and then: just a small, pleasant deed, which should be, and remain, all by itself, instead of becoming, as it relentlessly does, a link in a chain which stretches out to all eternity. For instance, why *shouldn't* one offer a saucer of milk to a film-star kitten tired with an hour of play amongst the chestnut leaves, when the kitten is not one's own, and one does not wish it to be? The answer, however, is all too obvious.

I did my best about Moira. I carried her down the lane, opened the door of the cottage where she lived, and, the occupants being out, dropped her inside. Then I went back to Nutkins, but not with a light heart.

What nedeth it to sermon of it more?

as the Pardoner said in Chaucer's tale. The end of this story, as of all proper stories, is implicit in the beginning, and already plain enough. Next day Moira was in the garden again—*and* in the house. In the evening I took her home as before. I continued to take her home every evening for the next six months; then one night I found the door of her cottage locked.

'Well, Moira, my dear,' I said, 'it looks as if you'll have to sleep at Nutkins for once.'

Moira showed no concern. She did sleep at Nutkins, and, with the consent of her first owners, she has done so ever since.

For six months, then, Moira had been ours in fact. Now she was ours in name too. There she sat, pleased as Punch and pretty as paint and wholly confident in our love and

care. Naturally she received both in good measure; nevertheless, such is the selfishness of men that I could not help a wry glance into the future. Herodotus in his history of the world found space to comment upon the awful fertility of cats; and they breed with the same nonchalance and vigour in England today as they did in Egypt twenty-five centuries ago. We were in for it again, inescapably.

HERE we were, then, well settled at Nutkins in our supposed freedom after my thirty years or so of teaching in various parts of the country. But were we free? Not a bit of it: Susie and Moira between them saw to that.

It is unkind to complain. As I write this in my study (it is a wet June morning), Susie is lying at my feet, not caring if it is wet or fine, quite content with the moment as it is. A minute ago she rushed to the window and barked furiously at some inoffensive person passing the gate: then, knowing that I dislike these sudden outbursts, she came back to my table, pressed herself against my legs and looked up at me as if to say she was sorry. Now she is lying flat on her side, her head on the floor, and every now and again I can see one bright eye roll up at me behind her shaggy eyebrows. Perhaps I know more about life than Susie does; but Susie lives it better than I do. She does not bother herself to

look before and after,
And pine for what is not,

or fret under life's necessary compulsions. In me, I fear, there has always been something of the moral anarchist and vagabond, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the extreme orderliness of my long life. How pleasant it would be, I

cannot but feel, to act just once—or possibly twice—upon the moment's whim, without regard to duty or consequence: to up-anchor, say, when wind and tide happen to serve, and sail away beyond the sunset and the baths of the western stars—or even to Cornwall again, for I do not wish to be greedy. I slip into the metaphor naturally enough, for at the time to which I have now come in these memories, *Herga* was still waiting for us on her mooring in Yarmouth harbour. Susie, to be sure, we could take with us in *Herga*, or pretty well anywhere else; but not Moira. One cannot travel around with a cat. Cats do not come when they are called, or patiently endure, as dogs do, whatever is uncomfortable, or unfamiliar, or alarming, merely for love of their masters. For cats, as for ourselves, love is not enough without certain tangible evidences of it. And as for *Herga*, poor Moira could not have endured her, and, sooner or later, she would undoubtedly have gone for a stroll along the bowsprit, when we were not looking; then she would have lost her nerve, slipped off, and drowned herself. No; Moira, the little wretch, had tied us by the leg again with an unbreakable chain.

Of course in the old days, now hardly imaginable, this would not have been so. In the old days even families like ours had a cook, and a cook meant liberty, for she looked after the animals when we went away. Daily helps, however well-disposed they may be towards Susie or Moira or the rest of them (and I think Rosalind chooses them chiefly for that quality), cannot perform that service. The responsibility is ours alone, and always. When, therefore, we went away for our annual holiday—for, Moira or no Moira, we had to have one—it was necessary, as it still is, to contrive. The contrivance was a simple one: going ourselves, we would invite someone else to take our place. Naturally the substitute had to be of the right sort, and we still keep a

little list (a very little one) of suitable people. They must be appreciative of cats: not just kind and tolerant, but appreciative. It would not do if we were to feel on our return that they had looked upon Moira merely as one of a species; and as for Fudge . . . but I must not anticipate. They must be able, also, to accept without diminution of esteem Susie's regrettable behaviour at the arrival of the postman, and not to raise their eyebrows unnecessarily high when she goes raging after the milkman—the milkman himself, I hasten to add, has long since taken her measure and treats her with indulgence. And, of course, they must like Nutkins. Anyone who might think that Nutkins was a rather *poor* little house; who might object to the uneven flagstones on the scullery floor, or turn up his nose at finding the bath in what used to be a large cupboard under the stairs in the kitchen—nobody of that sort would do at all.

At the head of our list is Olive, whom I mentioned before as having taught Buzzle to sing *Annie Laurie*. I think Olive is almost as fond of Susie as she was of Buzzle; Susie returns her affection without stint, and, as Olive always tells us that to come back to Nutkins is for her like coming home, it is no wonder that she and her family head our list. With them at Nutkins, our holiday has no anxieties: we are confident that on our return the animals will be as happy as they were when we left them—though none the less pleased, we hope, to see us again.

Yes: it is mean to complain, as I said, with Susie there at my feet, blissfully unaware that there is anything to complain about. But I am speaking of seven years ago, when the chain we imagined we had discarded had been fastened and we had not yet grown accustomed to it. Besides, it was not only Moira herself who in innocent and kittenish gaiety mocked our loss of liberty: it was also the thought of her

children yet unborn. Like Macbeth in the witches' cave, I seemed, in my more bilious moments, to see the line of them stretch out to the crack of doom. Inevitably Moira would have kittens by the bushel. She would be as prolific as Fluff, or as any cat in the Egypt of Sesostris. I should spend my life disposing of kittens in an agony of spirit, and still the number of them would grow. They would not only bind us to their service; they would ruin us by mounting bills at the fishmonger's and butcher's. They would eat us out of house and home—'Poor little things,' Rosalind would say, as she poured the cream from *all* the milk bottles into a row of saucers, 'they're still hungry.' And as for our annual holiday, nobody on our list except Olive could ever be expected to take charge of such a horde; so if Olive could not come, what was to happen to us? It was a grim prospect.

In the event, however, few things are as bad, or as good for that matter, as we hope or fear. Life somehow goes on. During the past seven years, I have not been much luckier in getting rid of kittens than I was in the old days—though we did foist Tabitha off on Anne and Hodge on Lesley; but I have tried hard to be more sensible. Up to a point I have succeeded; for at the present moment we have only two of Moira's countless children.

And one of those children is Fudge.

FUDGE

I SAID I have tried to be more sensible. That is true; but I do not like being sensible in this matter. I do not improve with practice. The older I get, the more painful I find the need. Often I have woken up in the morning with an undefined weight upon my mind; then sleep has cleared away, and I have known the cause of it: the kittens were a day old. Then has come the absurd and miserable waiting until Rosalind was out of the house—for to share this distress would be to double it—the grim preparation of my gear, the treacherous removal of Moira into another room, and, finally, the guilty walk down the garden path with the spade. Rosalind and I never speak of it after it is done; but we look at Moira and silently hope that she will forgive us. Reason tells me that Moira does not care a button; but reason was never a comforter. *I* care.

Sometimes I have hired an assassin from over the way; occasionally I have sent for the vet; once (but never again) I have employed a chemist; and once I telephoned to the R.S.P.C.A. This last was an important occasion in our history, as I shall show.

Rosalind was away in London at the time, and I had meant to do the thing myself. But I suddenly remembered being told that the R.S.P.C.A. sometimes included the disposal of kittens amongst their services. I telephoned,

hoping that the information might be true. It was not true —quite; but I was promised a visit that morning as a special favour.

The official came, and I led him to the box in the dark corner behind the bath and under the stairs where Moira and her family had been enjoying themselves. Moira herself was shut up in the bedroom. He pulled out the five diminutive creatures and held them in his large strong and kindly hand.

'You're keeping one?' he asked, 'for the mother's sake?'

I nodded.

'*That's* the best kitten,' he said, and laid a finger on a squirming ginger back. 'He's fat as butter.'

'*He?*' I said.

'Oh, yes.'

I nodded again. The little morsel of life was returned to the box—alone—and Moira was fetched to make what she could of her diminished family.

Presently I had another look at my survivor—I *could* look at him now, for he was going to live. He was an ugly little thing—new-born kittens always are; and he was ginger. I began to be anxious about what Rosalind would say on her return. We had never had a ginger cat before, and I myself had never looked upon them with much favour. I had a prejudice against ginger cats; it seemed to me, unreasonably enough, that they were inclined to be low. I fancied them thin, powerful and scrawny; I thought they lived mostly on walls in the less savoury parts of towns, stepping slyly along with arched backs and thin tails waving. And I suspected that they usually came home with one eye closed and their ears torn. The very word 'ginger' has a sneering sound. I do not care about pedigree in either cats or dogs; but I do like my cats to have a certain measure of gentility—and that was what, in my belief, ginger cats

never had. Of course, it was a silly prejudice, as all prejudices are, and arose from the old error of failing to see the trees because of the wood. Wise people know that it is only the trees that matter.

So it was not without apprehension that I greeted Rosalind on her return a couple of days later. She made straight for the box under the stairs. I followed.

'As a matter of fact,' I said nervously, 'he's *ginger*. That chap from the R.S.P.C.A. said he was the best. There *was* another male, but not a very good one.'

To my relief and surprise Rosalind was delighted.

'Let's have him out,' she said, and pushed aside the curtain which conceals the dark cavity under the stairs. Then she stooped down and reached in with her hand. The kitten greeted this liberty with a loud and determined spit. Quite evidently, he was already a young person of character.

Precisely when and why the newcomer was named Fudge I do not know. We have seldom named our cats deliberately; they have gone, often for months, by many names, most of them absurd—mere sounds of endearment in the 'little language' one would blush to record—until one name has somehow stuck. But Fudge he became. I shall not attempt to describe his kittenhood: all kittens are the same, or nearly—not in looks, but in their doings. Many times Rosalind and I have watched some small pansy-faced rapscallion of three weeks old trying out his paces on the sitting-room carpet (tail erect, front legs stiff, back legs not quite under control), and we have exchanged glances as I murmured: 'Yes, my dear, I have seen *you* before!' Fudge's only distinction, apart from his beauty, during his extreme youth was his wildness. He was a fierce little animal. The only person he never bit or scratched was Susie, who loved him from the first and played with him

constantly. He would pretend to scratch her often enough in their games, but the claws were always sheathed.

He grew fast, and continued to grow. Sometimes I think, though he is now two years old, that he is growing still—but of that in a moment. First I must go back to the question of his colour.

Fudge is not ginger after all—he is nothing so vulgar. What he is, is by no means easy to explain. We have had many tries at describing him to each other: apricot was one attempt, but it does not quite do. My brother, perhaps inspired by the occasion, said he matched rum, a little diluted, in the glass when it was held up to the light. Possibly one might call him fawn—light fawn, especially where he shades delicately off to the white of his chest and underparts and feet. Personally I think he most resembles in colour the last dead leaves which we see hanging on the Spanish chestnut tree on a sunny morning in November. His fur is thick rather than long—two inches thick at least, and exceedingly fine and soft. He has a white patch on each cheek, and his royal tail has alternate bars of lighter and darker gold.

I think he is larger than Wuzzy was; but it is hard to be sure. How does one measure a cat? They are such elastic beasts. Lesley once, when she was about six, put the matter neatly: 'That cat,' she said, pointing at one of the indeterminate tabbies; 'that cat is short but long.' Anyway, Fudge is very large. Standing on his hind legs, he can put his chin comfortably on the kitchen or dining-room table, and reach with a paw a long way inwards from the edge—as he too often does, if there is anything worth reaching for. Whatever he lies on, he seems to fill; the backs of armchairs he likes as much as anything, and whether the chair is a big one or a little one he covers it precisely from side to side. Once we spent a futile ten minutes in trying to weigh him on the kitchen scales; but, though he will stand a good deal

from us, he would not stand that. We balanced a tray on the scales, and tried to balance Fudge on the tray; but he capsized the whole contraption and left us still guessing. Size is not necessarily a virtue in either cats or men; nevertheless we are proud of Fudge's size—perhaps simply because you can't have too much of a good thing.

And Fudge, without any doubt, is a very good thing indeed.

IMPROVEMENTS

It rained last night, and was still raining when we had our breakfast in bed in the Hut with the pair of chaffinches, who have taken to bringing their family into the garden and even on to our beds to be fed with crumbs and morsels of butter. At about ten, however, very suddenly, like the drawing back of a curtain, the sun came out strong and hot. I at once went round the garden, to see how pleased everything was. The earth was steaming. There were a million daisies on the lawn, which I was sure were not there yesterday, and I picked a first handful of broad beans and the first five strawberries.

Then I carried my gear into the Hut garden, to begin writing. The Hut garden is my favourite place to work in, but this morning it would not do. It was too hot, and the wind, fresh and westerly, blew my paper about. So I gathered up my traps again and took them into the study; but that was no good either. It was still too early for the sun to be on the window, and the room seemed dark and musty. Anyway, I do not really like working indoors in the summer, if I can help it: there isn't enough to look at when I get stuck and cannot think of the next sentence. There

are writers, I know, who advocate writing in a cell, or at any rate in a room of which the only window looks out on a blank wall, lest the swift warm flood of their thoughts should be checked by irrelevancies. I admire and envy these men, for it must be a great experience to be so profoundly possessed by an idea that one dreads any sort of interruption. They must be inspired, the lucky fellows. With me the case is very different: I am a writer of the plodding sort; all my life I have suffered from a singular lack of inspiration, and nothing pleases me better than to have an excuse, at frequent intervals, for stopping and doing something else for a minute or two. Indoors, there is not much else to do, except to fill a pipe and scratch Susie's chest, whereas in the garden there is plenty. I remember, for instance, that the little red rambling rose under the holly tree has poured its new growth like a cascade of green water over the peony, and that it ought to be cut back a bit to give the peony (which is almost as old as ourselves) a chance; or that when I mowed the grass yesterday at the end of the dell—the little separate lawn up the three brick steps which Bob and I made a few years ago, at the extreme pointed tip of the garden—I did not do the edges. It is immensely important, I feel, that the edges should be done at once, so I lay down my books and papers with a happy secret sigh and go off to fetch the shears. Somehow one does not think of these things so much when one is indoors. This reluctance to go on with my book I share, I am happy to remember, with Dr Johnson. 'I wonder, sir,' said Boswell to him one day, 'that you should prefer not writing to writing.'

'Sir,' Johnson replied, 'you *may* wonder.'

This morning, however, the garden would not do; nor would the study. So once more I collected my papers and carried them, this time, into the sitting-room. The sitting-room was full of sunlight. The french window was wide

open on to the lawn. There was a deep glow on the old oak corner-cupboard, which Rosalind likes polishing more than any other bit of furniture in the house. The whole room smelled sweet and inviting. I pulled up a chair facing the window, settled myself in, and began.

It was the next best thing to being actually out of doors. After the sudden evanishment (if I may borrow from Coleridge that agreeable but pedantic word) of the rain and mist, the garden looked lovely—greener than green, laughing and brilliant with movement and life under the wind. I could not see the top of the Spanish chestnut from where I sat, and the fact that I could not see it seemed to add to its height: leaning across my view some twenty paces from the window, it towered immense and swept downward with trailing boughs to within a foot of the lawn, and every separate leaf of its million leaves was leaping and glancing in the wind. Beyond it, to the left, was the copper beech, the best loved of our trees, deep-hued now with summer after the brief glory of the first unfolding of its pink transparent leaves. The grass on the slopes of the dell, where not so long ago the daffodils and bluebells were, was two feet high and swaying like the trees. I could hear the missel thrush, gay in the wind, talking to his chick who a week ago left the nest in the sycamore. He is the last of our birds to go to bed at night, and we, in our own beds in the Hut, often hear his last few sweet shrill cries in the half-dark at ten o'clock. Susie—to make sure that I was not planning to go suddenly off for the week-end—had followed me close at heel from the Hut to the study and from the study to the sitting-room, and, relieved to find me settled at last, was sitting on the verandah, half in, half out, partly to keep an eye on me still, and partly in the hope that some interesting enemy passing along the road on the other side of the hedge might give her an opportunity for a good bark

and rampage. Her favourite enemy is a neighbour who clanks past with a bucket and four dogs about five times a day to feed his geese in the field at the corner of Lacey's Lane. Susie loses all sense of propriety at these moments; Rosalind says she hates the whole party, but I cannot but feel myself that such a rapture of rage can be anything but delightful to her, though to me it is trying in the extreme.

It occurred to me while I was sitting by the open window —and *not*, for the moment, writing—that during the seven years since we settled at Nutkins for good we had really made some very satisfactory improvements in the garden, especially in the dell, towards which I was looking. The dell wasn't much in the old days; its only beauty was the daffodils in spring and the cow parsley in June, and at the end of it, right in the tip, there was always a heap of rubbish from the bonfires I used to have there. It was, in fact, a bit of waste ground. It consists today of two little lawns on different levels, connected by the brick steps I mentioned, the lower lawn like a small green lagoon opening out beyond a narrow entrance, the upper one still smaller between the converging hedges on either side. Between the two, and to the left of the steps, is Rosalind's bank, a steeply sloping bed with a depth of about six feet. This bank is her own creation and especial care. It is planted thick with polyanthus, primroses and white violets. At one end of it, close to the steps, there is a red may, and we have cut an opening in the branches of the Spanish chestnut which hangs like a curtain right down to the ground, so that we can see the may, in its flowering time, from the sitting-room window. Rosalind's bank, for its first year or two, was spoiled by Susie who used to tear up and down it, all over the primroses and violets, in her mad pursuit—if that is the word—of enemies or motor bicycles passing in the road outside. To stop this I put some low hurdles along its

upper edge, so that Susie was compelled to use the steps. This she did, and still does; but, as she kept, and keeps, invariably to the same track in her headlong rushes, I soon found that the upper of the two little lawns was losing its pristine beauty. Nothing daunted, I cut off a strip eighteen inches wide which I turned into a cinder path, rolled smooth. Susie meticulously keeps to it. The headlong rushes, I must add, are continued parallel to the hedge right down as far as the verandah and along the length of a flowerbed, which for years, for that reason, was a desolation. This was annoying; but last year I had an idea: I bought some hydrangeas and planted them all along the front edge of the bed, leaving Susie's race-track (already hard as a board and flat as a pancake) behind them. Hydrangeas grow nice and big; so in a year or two we shall hardly see the race-track at all. What a nuisance dogs are.

Of course, there have been many improvements in the garden besides the dell: for instance, there is the hither end of the large vegetable bed, under the pear tree which was ancient thirty-five years ago and is now spared only because it still blossoms, and because on a certain dead bough at its top a blackbird always sings. Nothing eatable would ever grow at this end of the bed: it was too dank and shaded. So I cut it off by a neat grass path, and planted it with michaelmas daisies, perennial phlox, a few lupins, and other things which will grow pretty well anywhere. And, amongst these things, there is a laburnum tree, five feet high.

I must tell the story of this tree.

THE LABURNUM TREE

EVERYONE in the village is aware of Rosalind's fondness for the birds, and most of the children listen to her broadcasts about them. One result of this has been that the children, when they find an injured bird, bring it to Rosalind to be doctored. This is usually painful; for though she cannot refuse to take the poor little thing and do her best for it, the fact remains that nine times out of ten a hurt bird dies.

One morning, then, three years ago, there was a knock at our back door, followed by a whispered conversation. Rosalind opened the door, and there stood two little boys, Rodney and Roy. Rosalind's heart sank; for, if she had not guessed already, she saw at once that Rodney had a bird clasped tight in his hot hand.

Rodney held it out towards her.

' 'E's 'urt,' he said.

Rosalind took the soft small body into her own hands and looked at it. It was a young goldfinch. Its eye was still bright, and it did not seem to be hurt badly. As always, Rosalind was filled despite herself with a fierce desire to save its life. She nodded to the boys, closed the door and carried the goldfinch into the house.

The question of where to put him was quickly solved. Moira was our only cat at that time; but Moira was quite

enough to eat poor Goldie—as he soon came to be called—so a safe and secret place had to be found for him.

At the end of the passage upstairs there is a bedroom. I think it is the smallest room I have ever seen. There is just space in it for a bed, with a chest of drawers at the foot. We use it only by necessity, on those rare occasions when we have too many visitors all at once, and it has always been known to us as the Nun's Cell. The Nun's Cell, then, was just the place for Goldie.

Rosalind, who never does things by halves, was determined to make Goldie comfortable and at once set about refurnishing the Nun's Cell in a suitable way. The first thing was some grass for him to hop on; to provide this, Rosalind got a tray and covered it with turf cut from some inconspicuous corner of the lawn—the bed in the Nun's Cell had, I should mention, been previously dismantled. Rosalind laid the tray of turf on the floor. Then she fetched some branches of apple blossom and tastefully disposed them here and there for Goldie, when he felt better, to play amongst. This, with some groundsel in a pot, some bird-seed borrowed from a neighbour, and a waste-paper basket turned on its side for Goldie to roost in, did very well for a time; but two or three days later, when the wound on Goldie's wing (for the boys had found him caught in some wire) began to heal, Rosalind saw him, when she looked through the ventilator grating in the door, trying to flutter up to the window-sill. It was evening; the small, high window faces west, and Goldie was longing for the free air and the sun again. He had reached a chair which stood under the window, but could get no higher.

It was then that Rosalind thought of the laburnum tree. It was a seedling from our old one, and about three feet high. If it could be planted near Goldie's lawn, he might flutter to the top of it, and thence, as his strength increased,

to the window-sill and the evening sun. And planted it was, in a box filled with earth, and set down close to the lawn and amongst the apple boughs, over which it rose. It was a great success, and that evening to her joy Rosalind, when she looked through the grating, saw Goldie roosting right in the crown of the little tree, as content as a captive bird can be.

We kept Goldie for a week, and by that time the wound on his wing was healed. We carried him up to a certain bank we know in a hollow between the downs, and there, where the bank rises to a thick, tangled hedge, we let him go amongst the stems of the burdocks and thistles. Next day we visited the spot again, but could not find him; so we hoped that he had flown and that all was well with him.

Afterwards, when the Nun's Cell was stripped of its greenery, Rosalind replanted Goldie's laburnum in the place I spoke of, under the old pear tree. This year it flowered for the first time.

THE ROOF

PERHAPS the greatest improvement of all during these last seven years was the roof, which we had entirely rethatched. To be sure, I was writing in the last chapter of improvements to the garden, and the roof belongs not to the garden but to the house. Yet to me at any rate there seems no inconsistency. I cannot imagine Nutkins without its garden, nor the garden without the house, so well the two agree together.

The thatch had become very brittle and bad, and leaked in several places, and an insufferable number of starlings—vulgar birds—had nested year after year under the eaves in large holes which they had torn out from the straw. Lying in bed in the early morning we used to hear them in the attic above the bedroom, flopping about from beam to beam and on the plaster between them. The noise of their feet was so odd, loud and unbirdlike, that for a long time we thought they were rats dragging something about—though goodness knows what. *Flop*, they went: *floppety flop*—all through the early morning hours. So what with the leaks and the starlings, we thought it was high time for a fresh thatch.

I have called starlings vulgar birds, and so they are, singly, or in small companies such as gobble up in ten seconds all the food we put out on the bird-table. They have a coarse and vulgar gait and always appear to be in a hurry. But I must not be unjust to them, for there were occasions

in Dorset when they filled me with wonder and delight. On these occasions they were neither single, nor in small companies; they were in multitudes. We used to watch them in autumn from the windows of our house, thousands upon thousand of them, a thundercloud of starlings darkening the sky towards evening, and sweeping across to a line of ancient beeches, which bowed their crests under the weight of them when they alighted. Then, a minute later, up they would go again, the storm cloud drifting and swirling about the sky, until by a single impulse it descended upon other trees. And once, looking in the fading light at a field near the house, I said to Rosalind: 'I never noticed before that that field was *ploughed*. I thought it was meadow——' and almost before the words were out of my mouth, the darkness rose from the field and it was green again. Few living creatures, certainly not men and women, are improved by mere numbers; but starlings are an exception.

A thatch, if it is well put on, may be expected to last, with occasional patching, for about twenty years; but though we had a bit of the roof rethatched when we bought the cottage, and have had a good deal of patching, one way or another, during subsequent years, we had never before had the opportunity of watching the work done. This time we saw the whole process from beginning to end, and I found it fascinating.

In the first place, it seems to me a pleasant thing to roof one's house with a cornfield; there is an integrity and country common sense about it, which is not easily found nowadays when we have become so clever at outwitting nature in almost all her operations. I have not forgotten what Polixenes said to Perdita, when she objected to the carnations and streak'd gillyvors, of which her rustic garden was, and should remain, barren. No doubt Polixenes was right, and the art which changes nature is itself nature

no less than what it changes. All the same, I have a secret sympathy with Perdita. She did not like substitutes—or even improvements; for her, they were nature's bastards, and that was that.

Moreover, one does not roof one's house with a cornfield only, but with a *neighbouring* cornfield; and that adds to the propriety of the thing. Bricks and slates and tiles may come from goodness knows where; they do not settle in comfortably, but remain strangers in their new locality—or 'overners,' as we call them in the Island. But the walls of Nutkins were built of local stone, and its roof has been made, for the past three hundred and fifty years or so, of successive reapings of straw from neighbouring cornfields. Thus it belongs to its little angle of earth in a way that a new house never can with its bricks from Birmingham, its slates from Cornwall and its timber from the other side of the world.

The thatcher told me much that was new to me and of great interest: for instance, he buys his straw when the wheat is still standing, and in the ear. He takes a look at the field and makes his offer, estimating how much straw it will produce and of what quality. He will never, if he can help it, buy straw which has been grown on land fertilized by chemical fertilizers, for that straw will be brittle; and the best straw is from wheat grown in a heavy clay soil. Thus, going about the Island, he will have his dumps of straw here, there and everywhere, for he does not cart it all home, but stacks it on the spot, and for each job he does he will draw from the dump which lies nearest to hand and most conveniently. As with the straw, so with the spars which, after the preliminary tying of the first trusses to the ledgers and rafters of the roof, are used to fix the straw in place: they are split hazel rods cut from a copse not ten miles away.

A thatcher's tools are of the simplest and have not changed for hundreds of years: they consist of a 'blade' —like the blade of a scythe—shears (worked with one hand, like those used for sheep-shearing), a fine wire rake (for combing the straw like unruly hair) and a heavy wooden mallet for driving home the spars. These, with ladders and a pitchfork, complete the thatcher's equipment.

Knowledge and skill I have always admired wherever I have met them; and whenever I watch an expert at his work, I covet his expertize and wish I could share it. Thatching is a beautiful craft. One small detail in it I thought, as I watched our thatcher, that I should be able to do—twisting the spars. Sometimes for an hour at a time the thatcher would sit on the grass close under the hedge, twisting spars: he would take one of the slender hazel rods, three feet long, and needle-pointed at each end, from the tank of water where it had been soaking overnight, and with a single swift rotary flick of the wrists bend it double into the shape of a staple. Nothing looked easier; but when I tried, I could not do it.

A good thatcher is something of an artist as well as a craftsman—though I know the distinction between the two is slender enough. But what I mean is that he is not content for his roof to be waterproof and efficient: it must satisfy his eye as well. Our thatcher was displeased with his predecessors's treatment of the thatch over the upstairs windows. It was too flat, and lacked interest, so he reconstructed it to his taste, rounding it into swelling curves which gradually and subtly flattened as they ran up and back to the ridge of the roof. In the process of moulding these curves, he used from time to time to come down from his ladder and take a look at the effect from the further side of the road, like a painter who stands back from his picture. And one day he told me with much

satisfaction how he had solved a tricky æsthetic problem: the treatment of the eaves. One end of Nutkins is higher than the other, where the ceilings on both floors have been raised in comparatively modern times, and this fact presented a problem as to the best method of finishing-off at the point of junction. 'As I lay in bed this morning,' the thatcher said, 'I *saw* how I should do it.'

Apart from skill, what an admirable thing mere knowledge is. Our thatcher gave us a striking instance of it —at least, it struck *me*, though no doubt it was all in his day's work, and nothing extraordinary. The very night after the thatch was finished there was a violent storm of rain—*and the roof leaked.* To our horror when we woke in the morning, we saw a damp patch on the bedroom ceiling. Immediately after breakfast I telephoned to the thatcher, my voice breathless with indignation and disappointment. He laughed.

'That will be a spar,' he said nonchalantly. 'I'll be round later.'

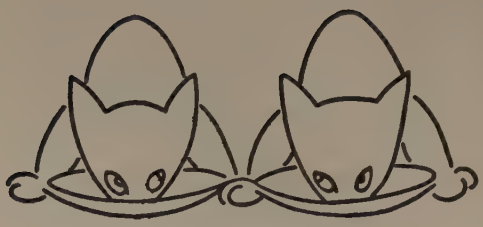
He came before the morning was out, and I showed him the dreadful patch on the bedroom ceiling. Unperturbed he erected his ladder, climbed it, and without hesitation pulled out a spar and slammed it in again.

'There,' he said when he was back on the ground, 'you won't have any more trouble now.' And we did not.

A spar, it appeared, driven into the straw vertically instead of obliquely, will lead water through and cause a leak. That I could understand; but what astonished me was that amongst the many thousands of spars used in the work he was able, after seeing the location of the leak, to go at once and unerringly to the single one which had caused it. I am glad our thatcher drove in one spar vertically by mistake; the fact that he did so gave me a greater sense

of his knowledge and skill than I should have had if he had made no mistake at all.

A new thatch is a beautiful thing. For about a month we looked with deep pleasure at our cornfield roof shining golden behind the sycamore, as we walked down the road from the bus stop. Then the gold began to fade. Now it flaunts no longer, but, in its soft hue of greyish fawn, unobtrusive and mild, it is merely the roof which the house has had for centuries, and will, I hope, continue to have for a very long time to come.



THE FIRE

Two years ago our beautiful new thatch was destroyed by fire. Let me hasten to add that it was repaired by the same thatcher, and is now as beautiful as ever. But to watch it burning was dreadful—not only for us, but for Susie and Moira and Fudge, who was then a year old.

Perhaps it is true that there is a soul of goodness in things evil—at any rate, to put the matter more cautiously, in some things. Certainly our evil fire taught us a thing or two which we did not know, most notably what it is to have neighbours. I should not say that Rosalind and I were morose or unfriendly people; nevertheless, at the same time, we are not exactly matey. We are always the last to hear the best bits of village gossip. We keep the hedges round Nutkins garden high, and tend, when we go out, to avoid conversations in the lanes, or over gates, lest they should go on too long. Occasionally, seeing a great talker strategically placed between me and home, I have gone round another way—say down Lacey's Lane—to avoid him, or suddenly assumed an air of urgent business and rushed past with a lifted hand and a breathless good morning. Not that we have not friends: we have many. It is merely that we do not continually seek them out. In fact, for quite long stretches of time we are very well by our-

selves, and have even wished, on occasion, that our hedges were still higher.

I hope I make myself clear about this. I have no use for hermits, and hope I shall not be mistaken for one if I confess my embarrassment upon being accosted, as I often am, by somebody who says: 'Oh, you live in Niton, do you? Then you must know So-and-So.' *Must* I? For in point of fact I hardly ever do. The truth is, I suppose, that both Rosalind and I (but I especially) are deficient in local patriotism. I never have been able to see why mere propinquity should be a bond of friendship. To believe that it is seems to me to put the thing upon an altogether wrong footing. It reminds me of those people who are always wanting to get together little parties of men who happen to have been at the same school, or in the same regiment, or something of that kind. After all, one must have been at school with somebody, so why make such a fuss about it?

Again, though we have no objection whatever to the Flower Show and Sports, the precise date on which they take place tends to escape us. We never get things up, or sit on committees, or go to sales; and we are unsound on the last year's record of the village football eleven. I did sometimes, it is true, when I was young, play cricket for the village, but only under protest and because Rosalind drove me to it, for I have always thought cricket a tedious game.

In fact, so far as village life is concerned, both Rosalind and I are what the Greeks used to call 'idiots.'

All this being so, it would not have surprised me if, when the house caught fire, the village in general had left us, not, indeed, to stew—for that is hardly in human nature—but at any rate to fry lightly, in our own juice. They might, that is, have left everything to the fire brigade; and the

fact that they did not was for that reason all the more heart-warming.

It was a cold Sunday afternoon in April, and I had just lighted the sitting-room fire for tea. It was going very nicely with some cunningly laid dry oak logs (the best wood, with ash and apple, for burning), when Bob, who had come down from London for a quiet week-end, called out to me that the chimney had caught fire. Hurrying back into the room, I found him shovelling up blobs of burning soot as they fell with a soft swish into the grate. The room was full of smoke. We shovelled together for a minute or two, and then I went out on to the lawn to see if there were many sparks coming from the chimney. There were not; nevertheless, as a burning chimney is always dangerous in a thatched house, I thought it would be best to telephone for the fire brigade—just in case. It was a good thing I did; for as I passed back through the sitting-room, where Bob was still gallantly shovelling, a new sound had suddenly developed, a horrid roaring in the chimney, a beastly noise. Moreover (though we could not then know it) the mortar had perished in the course of years between the bricks of the old chimney under the thatch, and all the time, through the cracks, wisps of blazing soot were finding their way out and up to the straw from below.

I was still on the telephone, when Bob shouted that the thatch was alight. There had been five weeks of drought and the straw was as dry as tinder. It would be twenty minutes before the fire engines could arrive. Meanwhile there was absolutely nothing we could do.

But our neighbours could do a great deal; and they did. Unknown to us, they had begun to do it long before the roof was burning; for before I had finished telephoning, a twenty-rung ladder was erected against the house. Two men, immediately they saw the chimney was on fire, had

run with it—no small weight—from a farm a quarter of a mile away. A minute later a bucket-chain was formed—from the scullery tap, through the kitchen, out into the front garden and up the ladder. A dozen of us kept it going, and though there was no hope of extinguishing the fire, which had now got a hold, we damped it down and checked its evil run along the dry thatch before the wind, and so gave the firemen a better chance when they should come. They were not long in coming, three engines from three neighbouring towns, and half the village was outside the gate to see them arrive. But my point is that, though half the village was watching the fun, the other half, those at least who were not in the bucket-chain, were already in the house and getting everything from the sitting-room and the bedroom above it out on to the lawn or along the passage to the Nun's Cell, which we hoped—justifiably, as it turned out—we should be able to save.

The firemen were on the roof in a wink, running about on the burning thatch like monkeys in brass helmets, squirting gallantly and flinging great chunks of smouldering straw on to the paths below. Others ran a hose up the stairs indoors and squirted the thatch from underneath, the water descending in streams through the bedroom ceiling, while Bob continued to pass chairs and tables and rugs and boxes through the window to uplifted arms which waited on the verandah to receive them.

In the middle of all this, passing along the passage upstairs with some package or other, I caught sight of Rosalind through the open door of the spare bedroom. Her face was black with smuts and soot and she was, for the moment, exhausted. She was half standing, half leaning against the chest of drawers, and there was a cigarette between her lips. A rare smoker, she had noticed a packet on the dressing-table, and suddenly desired one. Seeing

me pass the door, she called out to me through the din of trampling feet and crackling flames: 'Darling,' she said faintly; 'darling—have you got a light?' A fireman near us stopped work for a moment, stared, and burst into a roar of laughter.

Rosalind, indeed, was destined during this fateful afternoon to have her share of comedy; for soon after hell had really got going, and our poor little house had become a chaos of smoke, flame, helmets, huge boots and hissing hoses, the telephone rang and Rosalind happened to answer it. It was our friend Norah in Ventnor, and she had rung up for a quiet and comfortable chat.

'Hullo . . .' she whispered. 'Hullo . . . Is that the Silver Voice of Nutkins?'

'Yes,' shouted Rosalind. 'The house is on fire!' and slamming down the receiver rushed away to roll up another carpet. I must add that in ten minutes Norah and her husband were with us—but of that in a moment.

I was speaking of neighbours—village neighbours: those, I mean, who are bound to us only by propinquity and old acquaintance. How they worked! Without them the house would certainly have been gutted and all our possessions lost.

What does one do with an old lady, bedridden and infirm, when the house catches fire? For us the problem was quickly solved; for Gladys, who once worked for us (and brought Susie a sticky sweet, wrapped in paper, every morning without fail) was round before the fire brigade, and the old lady, Rosalind's mother, within five minutes was safely housed with her. And when the work grew hot, Gladys was round again with jugs of tea for the thirsty ones—and they were many. Mr Jackson, who has a new and second-hand furniture store in the village, and knows our few treasures, and is almost as fond of them as we are,

supervised their removal from the threatened rooms, and, unasked by us, packed the china and glass with infinite care into boxes, and with half a dozen helpers loaded the lot into lorries he had borrowed and took it all to his store. I asked him later for the bill for storage (about half the furniture we possess)—there was nothing to pay. He disliked, he told me, making money out of other people's misfortunes. Mrs B., on the other side of Lacey's Lane, quietly and without a word got her spare bedroom ready, in case Rosalind might need it. Mrs S. from the café at the crossroads offered to cook anything we might require.

As for beds, all three of us might have slept that night in any of half a dozen houses; but if Anna and Norah chance to read this book, they will know what determined us in our choice. Bob went to Anna and Carl, Rosalind to Norah. I myself stayed in Nutkins, or in what remained of it; and anyone who has followed me thus far will readily guess the reason.

Fire is a dreadful thing: more dreadful than tempest. One gets the better of a gale at sea, if one gets the better of it at all, by watchfulness, endurance and a judicious yielding to the sea's inexorable power; but it is no good yielding to fire. Fire is not to be outwitted by cunning or skill. It is a straight fight to the death between oneself and it. But, though for us fire is dreadful, for animals it is terrifying. Poor Susie, and Moira and Fudge! Susie we shut up in my study from the instant the thing began: that seemed (and was, as it turned out) the safest place. How she fared during the uproar I do not know, for I had not time to go and see; but at least she was safe and could not run away—as Sally once did merely at the popping of a few fireworks on Guy Fawkes' day. As for Moira and Fudge, when the firemen had gone and all was quiet again—quiet and desolate—they were nowhere to be seen.

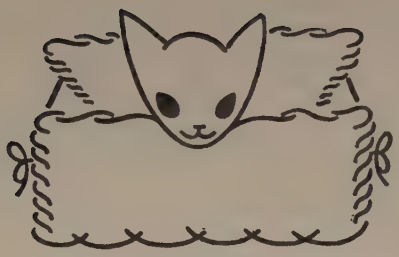
We went off for dinner with Norah, grieved for our house and anxious for our cats. Between nine and ten I returned. Nutkins was like a ghost. Half the roof was gone; our bedroom and the sitting-room below it were a desolation; heaps of straw smothered paths and flowerbeds, and great mounds of it half blocked the yard outside the scullery door. The smell of burnt straw and blackened timber lay over everything, heavy and sickening.

I could not see Moira or Fudge. Sadly I set about preparing their supper—familiar task—then went to the scullery door and called, though without much hope, as I had already called several times already. Almost at once, to my great joy, they appeared—Fudge first, then Moira, clambering doubtfully over the mounds of straw in the yard. A moment later they were both busy with their saucers, content, and apparently unperturbed at the topsy-turvy world. Before they had finished I telephoned to Rosalind.

'They've come in,' I told her. 'They are both, at this very moment, eating their suppers.'

I think she slept the better for the news.

That night I made up a camp bed in my study. Susie shared it with me, lying heavily across my legs. Fudge slept in a chair close to the head of it, Moira in another chair at the foot. It was not very comfortable for me, but I believe all the animals found it rather fun.



HODGE

After Fudge came Hodge. We were lucky with Hodge, because Lesley managed to persuade her husband Christopher that both of them wanted a kitten. If Christopher were told today that he had ever needed persuasion, how indignant he would be!

Hodge, like his brother, is ginger, though of a darker shade; he is an eccentric and beautiful animal, his rather long nose and very wide-set eyes giving him a misleading appearance of unusual gravity.

For five or six weeks Hodge's infantile company was much enjoyed by Fudge, who spent a lot of time softly biting his small round stomach and pushing him about with his great velvety paw. Then I took him by train to Dartmouth, where he was to live at the Harbour Bookshop with his new master and mistress.

I remember the journey well, for he was only a scrap of a thing and I was afraid it might upset him. However, it did not—far from it. Driving to the station in the car, I had not gone a mile before he had got his head out of the box, which I fancied I had strung up so strongly. I tried to push it in again with one hand, while I held the wheel with the other; but it wouldn't go; so the rest of the way to the station I had to keep my hand there against the determined

thrust of that diminutive soft head. Once in the carriage I made a better job of the string and strapping, and he settled down at the bottom of the box to sleep. He slept so long and so quietly that somewhere in the neighbourhood of Exeter I began to be afraid that he might be dead, or starving, so I opened him up to have a look. He was not dead; indeed, he was out of the box in a flash and had a lot of fun climbing about the railway carriage—and he was not starving, because he refused the bits of fish which I had brought with me in a jam jar. I had two fellow-passengers in the carriage, and neither of them made a single comment of any kind—dull brutes.

After a seven-hour journey we arrived in Dartmouth; but neither the long journey nor the strange house put Hodge in the smallest degree out of countenance. He skipped jauntily from his box, scrambled on to the back of the sofa, pounced once or twice determinedly at nothing, and then disappeared between the back of the sofa and the wall, to reappear a moment later on top with flattened ears, outspread arms and wild eyes.

Once grown up, Hodge became more ingenious and inventive in his play than any cat I have known. He retrieves like a dog. This was entirely his own idea: nobody taught him the trick or in any way suggested it to him. How it works is this: you throw a screw of paper, if possible in the line of some obstacle such as a chair, table or sofa, over which he leaps. He then seizes the paper in his mouth, brings it slowly and thoughtfully back and drops it at your feet. Having once started this game, you will tire of it long before Hodge does. His favourite toy is a small black bat with a ruby eye, which, when you open the folder in which it is enclosed, shoots in erratic flight towards the ceiling. This toy he calls an IT. He loves his ITS passionately, and devours them if he gets the chance. He has had a great

many of them. Sometimes his master hides the IT, shut up in the folder, between two books in the drawing-room bookcase, but Hodge, after a brief search, carefully extracts and destroys it. Once, when the purchase of new ITS was becoming a financial burden, his master concealed the current one under his neckties in the tie-drawer. Hodge was equal to the occasion: he pulled out all the ties, one by one, and triumphantly found his IT at the bottom of the drawer. I have myself been commissioned to buy ITS at the little shop in New Oxford Street where they are sold; once I brought one home for Fudge too, but Fudge thought it a poor thing, and, when it shot upwards from its folder, hid himself under an armchair.

Hodge's house in Dartmouth has no garden. To prepare him for this state of affairs we never once during his infancy took him into the garden at Nutkins, on the theory that what one does not know one does not miss. Indeed it is a very obvious theory: Hodge has no use for gardens whatever and is more than content with his house, and the coal-yard where he goes now and again to meet his friends. There is one story about him which I don't think he would mind my telling: having no garden, and a strictly controlled run of the street and the coal-yard, he naturally has to have an earth-box indoors. Once, while he was still quite young, Lesley and Christopher, thinking he would enjoy a sight of green grass and hedges, carried him in a basket, at great inconvenience to themselves, up a perpendicular hill to a certain pleasant meadow on the outskirts of the town, and let him loose. Hodge, however, detested the country scene —so much so that he ran away and disappeared. For hours his master and mistress called, but in vain; and at last they were compelled to return sorrowfully home without him. Next morning he turned up at the house quite well but apparently in some sort of desperate discomfort. Lesley let

him in, and the first thing he did, without even waiting to say good morning, was to rush upstairs to his earth-box, upon which he remained—busy—for an unconscionable length of time. Evidently the broad countryside of Devonshire was unsuited to his purpose.

Hodge was named, by the way, out of love for Dr Johnson and *his* Hodge, for whom the Doctor used to buy oysters. 'I recollect him one day' (wrote Boswell, and I cannot resist transcribing the passage) 'scrambling up Dr Johnson's breast apparently with much satisfaction, while my friend, smiling and half-whistling, rubbed down his back, and pulled him by the tail: and when I observed he was a fine cat, saying, "Why, yes, sir; but I have had cats whom I liked better than this"; and then, as perceiving Hodge to be out of countenance, adding, "but he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat, indeed." '

SIXPENCE

Six months after Hodge was born Moira had yet another ginger kitten. It was becoming a habit with her.

However, we seemed at first to be in luck again, just as we had been with Hodge; for our vet assured us that she knew at least half a dozen people who passionately desired a ginger kitten, so that there would be no difficulty in finding a home for him. To our great delight, therefore, the small newcomer was allowed to live. Moira was pleased too; and so was Fudge, who, as soon as the kitten was able to crawl ('slugging along,' as Lesley used to put it) pushed him about the floor with a large, soft paw just as he used to do with Hodge.

It is difficult to decide just when to send a kitten to his new home. If one does it too soon, one misses an unnecessary amount of his charming youth and high spirits; if one does it too late, one becomes fonder of him than is wise, and the parting is painful. In the case of Sixpence, however (for that was his name), we thought we had judged the moment nicely, and telephoned to the vet to say he was ready to go to whichever she found fittest of the six people

who so passionately desired him. The vet's answer was disconcerting: two of the people desired him passionately no longer; in fact, they had changed their minds and did not want him at all. Nevertheless four remained; but the vet, when she next had time to visit one of them, found, unaccountably, a similar depressing change of atmosphere: this one, too, had cooled. So, it soon appeared, had the other three. 'What? *We* want a ginger kitten?' they said. 'Good gracious, we never wanted anything less.'

I wish people were not so queer. Surely a man should know if he wants a ginger kitten. To want one or not to want one seem to me sensations extremely easy to distinguish. I myself, much as I loved Sixpence, did not want him in the least—and never pretended that I did.

For a while things looked bad: not, indeed, for Sixpence, but for Rosalind and me. But while we were away for our holiday in August, hope revived. We had left Nutkins and Fudge and Moira and Sixpence in charge of friends as usual, taking Susie with us, and after a week or so we received a letter. Most of the letter was taken up with praise of Sixpence, then three months old; he was, our friends declared, an adorable and altogether exceptional beast. This much Rosalind and I took for granted; but what followed really did make us sit up. '*If*,' the letter went on, 'you could possibly spare him; *if* he could bear to live in St John's Wood instead of Nutkins; and *if* (most important of all) *he is not too expensive*, we should love to have him.'

That was plain speaking. Two of our friends' conditions were easily fulfilled: we had done our best to spare poor Sixpence half a dozen times already—though I admit that by the sheer cussedness of human emotions we both felt for a moment, now that we should never see him again, that life would be bleak without him; and, secondly, I need

hardly say that he was not expensive at all. As to his living in St John's Wood, we would take a risk. Naturally any place would be a come-down for a cat after Nutkins; but I have always maintained that for cats, as for dogs, it is not the place but the people that come first.

That, then, was settled. We both drew a sigh of relief and—in spite of the fact that from time to time we glanced at each other mournfully, and murmured, 'No Sixpence when we get home!'—we were able on the whole to enjoy the remainder of our holiday with a better spirit, even though the part of it which we spent at Dartmouth with Lesley and Christopher was complicated by the mutual animosity of Susie and Hodge. No one could be fonder than Susie of her *own* cats; but her behaviour in the presence of strange cats is reprehensible in the extreme. She and Hodge, after their first horrific encounter, had to be kept in separate rooms, a tiresome though necessary arrangement which led to the oddest vagaries in our sense of time—I mean to Lesley's sense of time, and Christopher's, on the one hand, and to Rosalind's and mine on the other.

'*Poor* Hodge,' Lesley would say after half an hour. 'He's been shut up alone in there for ages. Surely it's time we changed over?'

'*Poor* Susie,' Rosalind would sigh after thirty-five minutes. 'She really must be with the family *sometimes*. She has been boxed up in that beastly dull room, all by herself, for half the evening.'

Then the change would be made: Susie clutched by the collar, Hodge, eyes popping and neck elongated, clasped in anxious and protecting arms.

Our holiday over, we set out on our return to Nutkins. The nearer we got, the more active those cussed emotions became.

'No Sixpence,' I said.

'Can you bear it?' said Rosalind.

For you see, Sixpence *was* an adorable kitten. Our friends were quite right. Moreover he was three months old—we had waited much longer than we had originally, and sensibly, intended before parting with him. He was not, in fact, just a kitten any more: he was Sixpence, which is a very different thing.

We decided stoically to make the best of it. After all, it was what we had wanted, and what we had done our best, in spite of several failures, to bring about. Now we had succeeded, and that was that. Two cats, Moira and Fudge, were quite enough.

I drew up the car outside the back gate of Nutkins at the corner of Lacey's Lane. Susie, sick to death of the long journey, leapt joyfully out. Rosalind and I followed, with a preliminary load of bags and parcels. Fudge was at the door to greet us. Then, before unloading the rest of the things from the car, I went through the sitting-room and out through the french window, as I always do the moment I come home, to have a look at the garden.

The first thing I saw was Sixpence. He was sitting on his haunches under the laurel on the edge of the lawn. He was not at all surprised to see me—possibly he had forgotten that we had been away. In any case, he seemed eminently content with life as it was.

For a few months we treated Sixpence with a sort of amused affection. When he climbed ecstatically upon our knees at inconvenient moments, he was pushed off without compunction, and no ill will on either side; whereas Fudge, should he do the same, always was, and still is, put down with an apology. Sixpence, his mistress used to say—though more, I think, in defence of Fudge than in derogation to Sixpence—was only a silly little thing. Nevertheless even in those early days, I caught her from time to time—

when, for instance, he used to march up to Susie with more than usual cockiness and confidence and push his face into hers—looking at him with a speculative and dwelling eye. Oh, yes, I thought to myself, Rosalind would come round in time, and so should I. And come round we did—indeed and indeed. Fudge's pleasure in his company was no doubt an element in our love for him; but even without that we should have loved him hardly less. He lived for only fifteen months. To the end of his life we used to tell each other that he was a silly little thing still; and the phrase, for all its irony of affection, was not without justice, for Sixpence remained, and would, I think, have remained however long he had lived, the baby of the family not in years only, but in character too. Most cats in repose seem to withdraw into the ancient and ageless mystery of their kind; certainly Fudge does, and one's fancy is drawn to picture the grave sorrow of a measureless antiquity in his half-shut eyes and motionless head. But little Sixpence was an infant always; always restless, always looking for a lark.

It would be tedious to go into the reasons for our final failure to get rid of Sixpence. I grieve now that we should ever have made the attempt to send him away. It seems a sort of treachery, for his gay and vivid life was cruelly short, and his death left a hurt which will take a long time to heal. Had he left us when we wished, we should have been spared that pain. Would that have been better, for him and for us? It is a foolish question, and there is no answer to it.

A LOSS

The life of animals is not less mysterious than our own. We can only guess at it by analogy with the broken lights of knowledge and perception which we have of the movements of thought and feeling within ourselves; and often enough, no doubt, the analogy is false. I make no pretence to understand why Sixpence behaved as he did throughout the day before he was killed; I simply record the fact, which to me who loved him was, in retrospect, very strange and moving.

He was an affectionate little creature, and I think especially towards me, just as Fudge has attached himself specially to Rosalind, but on the day before his death Sixpence never left me. He followed me about the house and garden in a way quite foreign to the general nature of cats. When I went to take a rest in the Hut before tea, he came with me and curled up on Rosalind's bed beside my own. For a time he slept, or seemed to sleep; then, chancing to glance across at him from the book I was reading, 'Hullo, Sixpence,' I said. At once he got up, jumped on to my bed, pushed his face into mine, and returned to Rosalind's bed, where he curled up to sleep

again. I picked some beans for supper, and he followed me into the bean-rows; I took the beans I had picked to the patch of grass by the garage, where I sat down to shell them, and Sixpence came with me, and stayed till I had done. I had taught him a trick when he was very young—or hoped I had taught him: it was to get him to leap from the ground up into my arms, when I clicked my fingers as an invitation. He used some time ago to do it often, but for a few months past he had tired of the game and would not play. That evening, however, as I stood on the path under the laburnum, he came to my feet unasked, and crouched for his spring. I held out my arms and, without any further sign, he sprang. Again, as I sat on the lawn, he climbed up my back on to my shoulders, and stayed there, rubbing his face first against my right ear, then against my left, till I had to put him down. At his supper-time I did not need to call him, as I usually do; he was there at the door, waiting.

None of these things by themselves would have been in any way unusual; for Sixpence, as I have said, was a loving little animal; but coming together, on that day, the last of his short life, they could not but seem strange. It was as if, Rosalind said, he knew that he would soon have to leave us. Was he, I wonder, asking for my protection? I do not think so; rather, I feel, he wanted to tell me that he could not help what was coming—for the world was made that way; he knew that I should grieve for him, and he wanted to say good-bye in the only way he could, and to assure me of his affection.

The next day, a Thursday, I was out at my work and did not get home until about three o'clock. I took Susie for her usual walk up past the gorse-patch and over Stony Field, and then, while we were pottering in the garden just before tea, Rosalind said: 'I haven't seen Sixpence—I've not seen him since early this morning.'

We were anxious, but not very anxious: he used often to go on jaunts we never quite knew where, and it might well have been that Rosalind, busy with her morning jobs, had happened not to mark him here or there about the house or garden, and that it was only within the last hour or so that he had gone away. Doubtless he would return, tail erect, swaying down the path from the garage, gay, naughty and nonchalant as ever. But though we called him, though we looked in all the places we knew him to frequent, he did not return. None of our neighbours had seen him. We hunted and called in the wild garden of the empty house across the road; but he was not there.

I suppose it was about seven o'clock when Rosalind and I both knew in our hearts that we should not see him alive again. But when supper time came, I still tried to believe that he would come. With a sad heart I rattled the larder window, went to the door, clapped my hands and called; but still he did not come. A little later Rosalind found him in the laurel bushes at the foot of the ash tree. She called to me, and I found her holding him in her arms.

'He's dead,' she said. Tears were running down her cheeks. I took him from her. He was injured, but not terribly injured—externally. It was a motor bicycle, we thought, that had given him a glancing blow, and the rider had driven on—perhaps without a thought. The top of his head against my cheek was still softer than silk. I laid him down by the raspberry canes, and went back to Rosalind, so that we could give each other what comfort we could. Then with pick and spade I dug his grave on the bank where the daffodils are in April, and laid him in it, wrapped in my old greenjacket.

For many days afterwards it was hard to believe that he was gone, so clearly I saw him in my mind's eye in all his familiar places. He was only a silly little thing,

but I wanted him. I wanted him back more than I can say:

'I know now,' Rosalind said to me.

'What?' I asked.

'How much I loved him. I always loved him, even when I said I hated him killing the birds.'

She need not have told me—she, who never for an instant hated any living thing.

Sixpence was only, as it were, his baptismal name. We nearly always called him by diminutives—most often Tiddy. I miss him always, but I think I miss him most at supper time. He would sometimes, during the last months of his life, plague us at supper time by coming late; Moira and Fudge would be waiting at the door at the first rattle of the larder window; but Tiddy, whose youth turned all things to fun, would be amusing himself elsewhere and had to be called again and again before he came stepping down the brick path, or leaping through the tangle of foxgloves and nasturtiums, gay and hungry and certain of his welcome, to the kitchen door. But now when I have rattled the window, Moira will be there, and Fudge will be there, waiting; but Tiddy will not come again.

MORE BIRDS

WHAT a long time it takes to write a book, and what a short time to read it! The disproportion is even more saddening than in the case of cooking a meal and eating it. Looking back a few pages I find myself writing of early June and the first five strawberries; and now it is the end of July, the raspberries are nearly over, and the figs on the roof of the Hut have grown to full size—smooth, hard and green. It has been a cold, wet summer; but for some reason I cannot understand everything in the garden, flowers, fruit, vegetables and weeds, has flourished exceedingly. I presume it is because they, unlike us, take things as they come and don't grumble.

We have slept out in the Hut since the middle of May, in spite of gales and rain, and Rosalind has had the pleasure of her breakfast with the birds as usual. The greatest pleasure this year has been a family of three young blackbirds, with their parents, all of whom owe their existence to Rosalind's care.

It happened like this: last year, some time in the early summer, Rosalind, while she was waiting for me to bring breakfast up to the Hut at about a quarter to seven, heard

the evil, ominous and humourless chuckle of a magpie, followed later by a prolonged clatter of alarm from the blackbirds. Such an event would normally have brought her out of bed in an instant, to investigate; but the nest which had been raided had up till then escaped her notice. It was particularly well concealed in the hedge between our garden and our neighbour's, and she was unaware of its existence. It so happened, however, that the previous day I had been clipping this hedge, and the consequence was that as Rosalind during the afternoon was walking along the grass path beside it, she saw the nest and put her hand in it to feel if there were any chicks there. There were, but they were dead; and when Rosalind withdrew her hand, her fingers were wet with blood. Fetching a chair, she climbed on to it, in order to look into the nest, and while she was looking she heard a soft croak from the grass below her. It was the one survivor of the brood, a very young chick, barely fledged and quite helpless. Rosalind picked him up and put him back in the nest, but he struggled out and fell again to the ground. Unable to do more she left him, but was delighted to observe later in the day that the hen blackbird was feeding him. Blackbirds are admirable parents, and it was soon clear that both the cock and the hen were determined to do their best to save their one surviving chick. Nor would they have had any difficulty in doing so, had it not been for Moira and Fudge—especially Fudge, who was then not much more than a year old and a gleeful hunter.

Rosalind, I need hardly say, at once joined forces with the parent birds. In fact, she took charge, and roped me in as an occasional lieutenant when I happened to be available.

'If *I* know anything about it,' she declared, 'that chick is going to live!'

It was bad luck on Moira and Fudge. For the next ten

days the freedom of the garden was denied them; they were let out at regular intervals, but never on parole—indeed no: every outing was supervised, by Rosalind with a stick in her hand, and by both of us whenever I was at home. As the days passed, and the chick grew in strength, he became more and more mobile, but Rosalind always knew—from hearing his voice and watching the parents—exactly where he was—and that spot both Moira and Fudge (who were infinitely more mobile than the chick) had to be prevented from approaching. Have you ever tried to prevent two cats at once from going in the direction of a particular spot in a large and well-grown garden, crammed with bushes, trees, vegetables and flowers?

'Where's Fudge?' Rosalind would challenge me the instant they were let out. 'Which way did he go?'

'Towards the strawberry bed,' I answer.

'Can you see him?'

I admit that I can't—not actually, at the moment.

'Find him,' says Rosalind, keeping her eye firmly on Moira, who is washing a front paw in temporary innocence under the lupins.

I go towards the strawberry bed, but without confidence as adjoining it are the raspberry canes, three rows, six feet high and very thick, with the gooseberries and rhubarb beyond. Fudge is not to be seen. Rosalind continues to watch Moira, who has now finished washing her paw and has moved to the rosebed in the middle of the lawn. The parent blackbirds keep up a continual clatter of alarm.

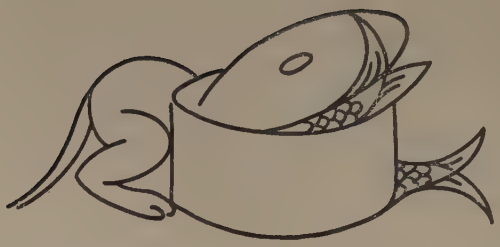
Suddenly Rosalind cries: 'Look out—there he is!' and Fudge—nowhere near the strawberries—emerges with quiet amusement from the privet hedge round the Hut garden.

'Keep him off!' calls Rosalind, and I hurry towards him, knowing perfectly well that if he wants to dodge, he will.

But with a flirt of his tail he skips up into the Beauty of Bath instead, and stays there rubbing his cheek against a twig and rather hoping that I will try to reach him down —and fail.

How long this goes on, I hardly know: to me it seems a very long time indeed. And it happens several times a day. What is more, whenever I was away at my work, Rosalind had to do it alone. And she succeeded. For ten days she kept the cats from the growing chick, and all that time its parents tended it, their one survivor. It grew rapidly in strength and mobility; on the second and third days it was hopping about our neighbour's compost heap on its spindly legs; by the sixth day it was off the ground, perched about a foot up on a twig in the hedge; on the seventh it had reached the top of a bush some four feet high, and by the eighth was amongst the syringa in the dell, from which it flew to the wych-elm opposite, a dozen yards away. Finally on the tenth day Rosalind saw it fly on vigorous though still tender wings from the dell to the Spanish chestnut, and knew that it would henceforth be safe, or as safe as a bird can ever be, from Moira and Fudge.

Now that same young blackbird—it turned out to be a hen—remained in our garden throughout the winter, and this spring built in the same hedge as her parents had built in, and hatched a brood of three. All three young ones were safely reared, and that is the family which has been taking breakfast every morning with Rosalind and me in the Hut.



MORE ABOUT FUDGE

FUDGE is not demonstrative as his half-brother Sixpence was, who would never leave us alone for a minute. He responds in his own quiet and dignified way to our affection. When we stooped down to say hullo to Sixpence, he used to meet our lowered cheek with a vigorous upward thrust of his head; Fudge, on the contrary, when we do the same to him, lowers his head and presses the top of it softly forward to meet the caress.

The friend to whom we lent Nutkins last summer wrote to tell us that he had not observed Fudge actually crying in a corner in grief for our absence; all the same I think he likes us best. Cats are supposed, perhaps rightly, to be by nature more aloof and self-dependent than other domestic creatures, and certainly Fudge likes, as indeed I do myself, to go off on his own from time to time, looking for a little bit of business or pleasure in the next garden or across the road; but when he is at home—and that is for nine-tenths of the day—he is singularly aware of us. We never pass him, indoors or out, without getting a quiet greeting—a lift of the head and a blink of his golden eyes. And of course there are ceremonial occasions, when he demands full attention. One of them is after supper in the evening, when, having received his small fragment of milk chocolate, he

settles himself on his mistress' lap together with the cross-word puzzle; and again, during her afternoon rest on the sofa in winter-time beside the fire, Fudge never fails to join her, and lies along, stretched to his fullest length in such exquisite relaxation and ease that his body is like liquid poured into a mould.

From his youngest days he has been, or has appeared to be, interested in our doings. I do not mean the intense curiosity, which he shares with Wuzzy, and I suppose most cats, in the contents of paper bags, parcels and open drawers: I mean *interest*—friendly and companionable interest. He will sit half the morning on the window-ledge above the kitchen table, while his mistress is preparing lunch (not his lunch, but ours), and turn his head gravely to watch every movement of her hand. It is the same with my jobs in the garden—he will stop chasing butterflies to come and sit near me, and watch. Once a thrush dashed itself stupid against the glass of the bedroom window and fell fluttering to the ground; Rosalind knew that Fudge was in the fuchsia bush close at hand, and ran to save the bird. But she need not have worried; for, to her surprise, there were the two of them on the verandah, within a yard of each other, the thrush still dazed, and Fudge looking at him—*interested.* Rosalind, as I said, was as much astonished as relieved, and so was I when she told me of it; but I suppose the truth is that cats, unless they are hungry, hunt purely for fun—and there is no fun at all in a dazed bird. They have no instinct to kill, only an instinct to catch; and catching postulates a moving object. Small birds quick with life are unhappily as irresistible to Fudge as to any other cat; and so are the cabbage-white butterflies which flicker and dance above the vegetable beds in early summer; but for dull and immobile birds he has no use at all.

We found him once staring at a blackbird which had

entangled itself in the strawberry net. He seemed mildly amused by its struggles, but made no attempt to harm it further. Again, we had for several years a tame blackbird called Henny, who raised many broods in the hedges round the garden. She used to come into the house, and never failed to tell Rosalind when she was hungry, often following her along the garden paths with urgent and expressive squawks. We were fond of Henny, and were naturally fearful that when Fudge grew to an age for hunting he would kill her. But he did not do so. Constantly we saw them on the lawn together, neither taking the least notice of the other. I suppose it is possible—just possible—that Fudge recognized Henny as a member of the family; but it is much more likely that he merely considered her a dull bird.

Fudge has no conscience. I am glad of this; for I have seen cats with a conscience, and do not much like them. No cat, to be sure, has a conscience such as a dog has, which makes him anxious not, if possible, to offend his master; but plenty of cats have a sense of guilt, which is the nearest thing. Caught stealing, they shrink back into themselves, and slink away. Fudge, on the other hand, is the gayest and most open-hearted thief I have ever known. He has no sense of property at all, or of propriety either. The responsibility for this endearing quality is, of course, largely our own. Both of us are poor disciplinarians, and cannot believe that it is really improper for Fudge to lift the lid from a saucepan and remove from it the fish, which was meant for his dinner in any case. Or, indeed, from any other saucepan. It may be annoying—but that is another matter. The best way to prevent Fudge, or any cat, from stealing food, is to put the food where he cannot reach it. That should be easy enough; sometimes, however, one forgets. Moreover, Fudge is an ingenious person and is apt to get round any little difficulties we may have thought to put in his way.

For instance, there is the small square safe which stands on the cupboard in the kitchen—a very ordinary little safe, made of wood with gauze front and sides. Once a week the grocer sends us a pound of sausages, wrapped in paper. A pound of sausages wrapped in paper is of great interest to Fudge; and it has happened once or twice that we have failed to mark the precise moment of its delivery, and Fudge has forestalled us. However, on the occasion I have in mind I myself received the parcel, put it in the safe, and thought no more about it. Not so Fudge. On the contrary, he spent a happy half hour pushing in the gauze (exactly how, I should much like to know), until he had made a gap large enough to admit his paw. On my return to the kitchen I found the sausages on the floor, unwrapped, and all pricked, ready for frying. Fudge was not there; but he well might have been—unashamed, and benevolent as ever. It was not greed which made him steal the sausages, for he had no intention of eating them. Raw sausages are disagreeable, anyway. It was just his idea of fun—as on that other occasion when, still a kitten, he took from the cupboard a blue bag containing half a pound of sugar, and ran with it down the garden path, leaving a snowy trail behind him.

Nor, I think, is it greed that inspires him to use all his ingenuity in getting hold of the rabbit bones which we hope we have safely disposed of after his supper. We put them in a bin just outside the kitchen door, to be buried in the garden when opportunity occurs. Fudge quickly learnt to prise up the lid of the bin with his nose and to hook out such bones as pleased him. This was tiresome, because rabbit bones are splintery things and not good for cats, or for dogs either; so having reproved Fudge, we laid a superannuated flat-iron on the lid of the bin, to keep it firmly down. Fudge was highly amused and by no means

disconcerted; he pushed the iron off, and nosed up the lid as before. Now we have a bucket with a close-fitting lid, held pretty securely in place by the handle. Fudge, of course, is trying again: once, as Rosalind and I were going upstairs, we heard a clanking in the yard, and on looking out of the window at the head of the staircase we saw him working away at the bucket. I suppose we laughed; anyway, Fudge was soon aware of us: he glanced up and (if cats could grin) grinned. Then he went on with the job. At last, having failed to get the lid off with either nose or paw, he pushed the bucket over with a great clatter on to its side, and stood back hopefully to watch the effect. Fortunately there was no effect: the lid remained in place.

What nonsense people talk about the inability of animals to connect cause with effect or to think things out. One summer night many years ago we forgot to fill Buzzle's bowl with water. He was thirsty, and, being a kindly animal and unwilling to wake us by barking, he pulled the bung out of the rainwater butt which stood by the door of the shed where he slept. It was an extravagant way of getting a drink, but served its purpose. Again, he had been ill on one occasion, and during his convalescence we made him wear a flannel jacket, an ignominious garment for any self-respecting dog. He took it off and buried it in the garden. I cannot but remember Sally, too, in this connection: she used to sleep in the sitting-room and a special rug was always spread on one of the armchairs to make her bed. One night we sat up later than usual, and Sally began to grow restless—either, I suppose, bored with our talk, or uneasy at the break in the familiar rhythm of things, which all animals seem to need. The first signs of restlessness were such as any dog might show; but when she found that they had no effect, her final move was to jump into the chair on the back of which the folded rug was lying, drag it

down on to the seat with her teeth and then do her best to nose it into position.

Fudge is hardly less ingenious than Buzzle and Sally were, as he proved by the affair of the kitchen window. One of the precautions which Rosalind takes to increase the safety of her birds is to keep the cats indoors at dusk, when the birds are preparing to go to roost and are an easier prey than during the daylight hours, especially when there are young ones about. The kitchen window is fastened with a latch—a commonplace iron hook which drops into a ring. How long Fudge considered the problem I do not know, but the day came when the clatter amongst the birds in the garden after supper plainly told us that Fudge was abroad. The kitchen window, which we had left latched, was open. The following evening I tied the hook securely into its ring with a piece of string, but Fudge, who apparently thought this merely a poor joke, bit through the string and lifted the latch (I imagine with his nose) as before. It is now secured with wire, and Fudge is, at any rate for the moment, nonplussed. And how is it that he knows Sunday from the other days of the week? He does not normally have lunch—only breakfast and supper, and a dash of milk at tea; but Sunday is hot-joint day, and, as it seems to us a trifle mean to allow the animals no share in this weekly luxury, we are accustomed to give them a little. Not a meal—just a taste. On other days Fudge rarely puts in an appearance at lunch-time; but on Sundays, as the joint is brought in, he enters without fail, stepping delicately and with tail held high. It is the same joint on Monday, and sometimes on Tuesday too; but it is on Sunday only that Fudge attends the meal.

It is not easy to be fond, as Rosalind is, of cats and birds at the same time; but then, I suppose, all affections are inconvenient and destructive of tranquillity. But I put it

badly: Rosalind is not fond of cats—or, if she is, that is not the point. She is fond of *our* cats, and that is a very different matter. Especially she is fond of Fudge. I, too, am fond of Fudge, and of all cats which have happened to be ours; but, though I have never actively disliked a cat, as far as I can remember, I am unwilling to claim a general attachment to them. I suspect a man who says he loves a species: a schoolmaster, for instance, who says he loves children, forgetting for the moment what little beasts some of them are. But Rosalind and I are, very definitely, fond of Fudge. That, of course, is because we know him—and I might add that we know him because we are fond of him. No doubt in a certain sense and to a certain degree we create for ourselves the characters of our pets, insensibly building them up over the weeks and months and years, and endowing, in our self-centred way, with human significances all sorts of fugitive glances, chance movements or familiar attitudes, of which the real meaning is as remote from us as Egypt. This is why it is nearly always so tedious to listen to another man's praise of his pet: we are outsiders and have not been present during the long process of creation. But the process goes on; it has certainly gone on with Fudge.

You, who read these lines, would see nothing either characteristic or endearing in the way, for instance, in which upon entering a room Fudge does not, as is the usual habit of cats, settle softly upon his haunches in some selected spot, but flops with an audible thump upon his side in the very middle of the carpet; or in his favourite attitude of couching, on tables or the tops of cupboards, like the lions in Trafalgar Square, but with the right paw only extended to its full reach in front of him; or, again, in his manner of entering through the bedroom window when we are having breakfast in bed. Most cats, having made their way along the penthouse of thatch and reached the sill,

would jump delicately down upon the floor, tread slowly across the carpet to the bed, and then deliberate as to whether or not they should jump on the bed itself in order to inspect what is on the tray; Fudge, on the other hand, runs along the thatch, utters a loud cry at the open window and, entering with a flying leap, hardly touches the floor before he is up again and on the bed, as it were in a single movement.

Rosalind, then, as I was saying, is fond of Fudge, and there is no need to repeat that she is also fond of the birds, especially of the robins, wrens and blackbirds who are the chief denizens of our garden. Now Fudge is not a bravo cat; I would not really call him a hunter; in most ways and at most times, in spite of his wild and fierce kittenhood, he is a gentle creature. Nevertheless he is a cat, and consequently catches birds: not, indeed, often, but now and then. When this happens, Rosalind has a double cause of distress: for there is not only the dead bird; there is also Fudge, and

to be wrath with one we love

is, as Sir Leoline in Coleridge's poem discovered, not the least painful, or the least rare, of human experiences.

I have already explained how we endeavour to keep the cats in at roosting time. Fudge is perfectly aware of our intention and much amused by it. Now that the kitchen window is secured by wire, it would seem an easy matter to prevent him from getting out. One has merely to close the kitchen door as well, and all's safe. But the trouble is, one *doesn't* always close the kitchen door; one may close it fairly often, as one goes in and out on the various jobs which have to be done between the eating of supper and settling down for the evening, but not, perhaps, quite every time. So Fudge waits—pleased and patient—until a chance

comes of slipping through. Of course, merely by slipping through the kitchen door, he does not find himself in the garden. There are other doors too, either leading thither direct, or into rooms with open windows. In fact, there are a great many of them. The most difficult (for me) to remember is the bedroom door at the head of the stairs—and the bedroom window naturally provides as easy an exit into the garden as entrance from it. The consequence is that it occasionally happens on a June evening towards dusk that Rosalind will suddenly confront me with the question: 'Where's Fudge?'

'He *was* in the kitchen,' I lamely answer.

'But he isn't now.'

'Then perhaps——' I begin; but before I can finish the sentence, Rosalind interrupts me.

'Is the bedroom door shut?'

'It *ought* to be,' I mutter.

Rosalind gives me a single glance, and hurries to the foot of the stairs. I follow, and together we look up. The door is wide open. A moment later Rosalind is in the garden.

What follows, Fudge enjoys immensely. Nine times out of ten he has no nefarious purpose, and Rosalind finds him sitting in conscious innocence under the fuchsia bush doing nothing whatever, and his thoughts as far from slaughter as can be. She approaches cautiously—and the fun begins.

'Fudge,' she calls in her sweetest and most persuasive tones, and takes another step. Fudge moves out on to the lawn, settles himself comfortably, and begins to wash a certain favoured spot on his stomach. His mistress follows.

'Fudge,' she calls again, still sweetly, as if nothing but sheer affection had brought her out to seek him. Then, stepping with assumed carelessness across the grass, she is within a yard of where he sits, when he stops washing

and, without bothering even to turn his head, skips off into the laurels under the chestnut tree. Rosalind frowns, and approaches the laurels with a quickened pace.

'Fudge,' she calls—more urgently this time; then, angrily, 'Fudge, Fudge!'

Fudge, however, remains in the laurel hedge, just out of reach, upright on his haunches like an image, blinking.

Rosalind changes her tactics. She gets a stick with a long and flexible end, and twiddles it alluringly amongst the bushes. It rustles in the dead leaves of past years. For a minute Fudge takes no notice.

'Fudgie,' says Rosalind, trying hard to keep the note of irritation from her voice. '*Naughty* Fudge.'

Fudge blinks again, then takes a downward glance at the moving object near his feet. Rosalind twiddles with all her art, and at last he makes a pounce—but it is only a half-hearted pounce, and seems to indicate not that he is interested in the stick, but merely that he does not wish to disappoint his mistress. He must not, in fact, let her down.

Then comes the last act of the comedy—invariably the same. Rosalind walks up and down the lawn, just clear of the edge of the laurels, trailing the stick on the grass behind her. Once, twice—three times perhaps—and no result follows; but at the fourth passage Fudge leaps, not half-heartedly now, but with all his vigour and delight. Still trailing the stick, Rosalind starts to run. Fudge follows, intent upon seizing again the flickering tip. Then she stops, and Fudge stops too; he lies upon his side, his head turned upward, and makes no further attempt to escape. The game is over; honour is satisfied. Rosalind picks him up and carries him back indoors.

It has all been rather tedious for Rosalind, but great fun for Fudge.

SUPPER TIME

We have always kept our cats indoors at night: in summer, as I have explained, to prevent them from being abroad at the birds' roosting and rising times, and in winter simply because it is more comfortable to know that they are safely at home. This means that in summer they are not allowed out after their supper at all; in winter, or as soon as the evenings begin to shorten, our method of procedure is different: at these times they are put out as soon as their supper is eaten, and brought back an hour or so later by a simple stratagem founded upon their greed.

I do not use the word greed with any derogatory intent. Very far from it: I like my animals to be greedy, especially Fudge, whose greed is shameless, and most endearing. Some cats are said to be fastidious feeders: indeed I knew one once (he was not mine) who would accept nothing but steak and kidney pie, and refused yesterday's cream. But this was absurd. Fudge is much more innocent and natural. Of course he has his preferences, like the rest of us, especially in the way of small occasional relishes, or appetizers, such as fragments of fried bacon or sausage. Dog-biscuit might, perhaps, be included in these; for it is seldom that a new packet of biscuit meal—intended for

Susie—is put away in the kitchen cupboard (which is all too easy to open) without our finding a hole in the paper on the following day and rather a mess on the cupboard shelf. This, however, may be merely for amusement's sake, like his pursuit of the rabbit-bones in the bin. His chocolate, too, must be milk chocolate.

But when I speak of his greed, I am thinking not of titbits of this sort—which would not come within his ken at all, if he were brought up with proper discipline and disregard of minor pleasures—but of regular meals. These are almost as great a pleasure for me to offer as for Fudge to receive. Actually it is Rosalind who gives him his supper, while I am at the sink, washing up our own, and watching. It is one of my favourite moments in the day—or was, until Sixpence died. Sixpence took with him much of the gaiety and fun of it all, and neither for Rosalind nor me will it be quite the same again.

I loved those supper times: the cats, all three of them, followed us in with the tray of dirty dishes. For a minute or two they milled round with arched backs and stiff, plumed tails, the two elders tolerating, with moderate grace, the frequent buttings from the head of Sixpence, who even without the prospect of a meal found life almost too good to be true. Rosalind fetched the rabbit and fish from the larder, and I passed her the tin plates from the rack—three tin plates, one for Moira, one for Fudge and Sixpence who shared a plate ever since Sixpence was of an age to take solid food, and the third for Susie, who never joined the party in the kitchen, but waited, as she always waits, with doggish modesty and patience in the passage outside, her chin on the floor between her paws.

Then—I see them still—the instant the plates were on the table, the milling would stop. The three sat in a row with upturned faces, their whole bodies seeming to glisten

with anticipatory relish. Rosalind took a long time preparing the food, making sure that there was no small splinter of bone left in the rabbit meat. Sixpence took a turn or two round the floor, gave his mother another push, and returned to his place. Moira, growing impatient, jumped on to the table.

'Get *down*, Moira,' said Rosalind, and shoved her off. Down she went almost on top of Fudge, who looked at her sideways and gave her a casual swipe with his paw. Moira spat at him; Fudge grinned. Then Fudge, too, got sick of waiting; he stood on his hind legs and put his chin on the edge of the table, as close as possible to the plate. Rosalind pushed the plate further in.

'Now, Fudge,' she would say warningly; then, '*No*, Fudge—*naughty!*' as a lightning paw shot out, and a fragment was removed from the plate. Rosalind thrust him down and went on cutting. Fudge blinked, and wondered if it was worth while hitting his mother again—but decided against it.

At last the plates were put down; there was one hoarse cry (like a seagull's) from Moira and Fudge, and all three were on to them.

It has often occurred to me at their supper time how dreadful it would be if we had nothing to give them, if by some fault or misfortune we betrayed that absolute trust.

As soon as the plates were licked clean, three faces were turned enquiringly upward in expectation of the milk, which was needed to wash down the mixture of rabbit and fish. The milk was not produced—and that is the simple stratagem which I referred to further back. All the cats were at once put out of the back door into the garden—always provided that it was not roosting time—and left there for half an hour or so. One call, and a clap of the hands, were then enough to bring them racing in again.

Sixpence was usually the first to arrive; full-tilt he galloped along the brick pathway to the door, rushed into the kitchen, and then back again to the door to see if his brother was on the way. He never expected his milk until Fudge was there to share it. . . .

Yes, that is how it used to be; but now that you, dear Sixpence, have gone, it cannot be the same again. It was all such a lark for you. Sometimes you used to try to copy Fudge while your mistress was cutting up the meat and to reach the saucer with your paw; but you were not tall enough and could not manage it. Our pleasure in Fudge's greed and Susie's patience remains, and will always remain while they are with us; but much of the laughter and fun of those supper times went when your brilliant small spark of life was so suddenly put out.

FUDGE AGAIN

It is difficult to avoid a touch of the sentimental in our relationship with animals—not that it matters much. What I mean is, we seldom see them, or attempt to see them, as they are, but prefer to abstract certain aspects of them which answer to what we require, and to magnify these. For instance, I do not much care for Fudge when he has a mouse. He finds mice sometimes around our neighbour's rubbish heap and brings them in. I am only moderately sorry for the mouse; and that is not, in any case, what worries me. What worries me is the change in Fudge. I hardly know him. As he crouches there on the kitchen floor with his shoulders hunched and the little creature in his mouth, all his happy and nonchalant grace is gone; he has become suddenly furtive and brutal. I used to think that even his face was altered as, the mouse in his jaws, he turned his head in quick suspicion towards Sixpence who, as likely as not, was sitting on his haunches, a wide-eyed and interested spectator, in the opposite corner of the floor, and warned him off—quite needlessly—with a low and breathy hiss. On such occasions he is not Fudge any more; he has become a plain, generic cat, and, though there are many unpleasing things in the nature of cats, as

in the nature of Hottentots and other creatures both animal and human, which I can accept with equanimity, I cannot but deprecate them in Fudge.

This is a weakness, and I readily admit it. 'Oh, but,' I can hear some detestable prig argue, 'if you really cared for Fudge, you would see him steadily and whole, and love him for what he is. Isn't it right and natural for cats to catch mice and birds?' Of course, he would be perfectly right, but he would be a detestable prig all the same. And he would have missed one small but important point: that Fudge, for me, is not merely a cat—he's Fudge. We meet on certain levels of mutual experience; on others we do not meet at all, and over these I draw a veil. Even with one's human friends one is forced to do much the same.

One morning when I came downstairs before breakfast to let Fudge out, he was not waiting behind the door as usual. I entered the room, and found him sitting bunched short, on the sideboard. He took no notice of me, not even turning his head. When I lifted him, he uttered a low cry of pain. I put him on the floor, and he crouched there without moving, his nose to the carpet. I at once thought he was going to die.

Anyone who cares for his cats and dogs will understand my needless fear. Dumb animals in their day to day intercourse with us are very far from dumbness; indeed they communicate their wants and feelings with an almost embarrassing precision and clarity; but in sickness an animal is dumb indeed—and dreadfully patient and resigned. A cat, especially, will make no fight to live; he is content to let the darkness come.

I looked at Fudge, and had no notion of what ailed him. The radiance and joyous life in him had gone suddenly out. He did not answer me. He shrank from my touch in pain.

He had gone away, a million miles, and I could not find him—and he did not care. I was sure he would die.

It was evening before the vet came. She smiled at our fears, and her skilful fingers in two minutes found what the trouble was. Poor silly Fudge! He had met his old enemy in the garden the previous night and had had the worst of the encounter. He was bitten in the haunch, and the wound was infected. Happily such things, for cats or men, are less serious now than they were a few years ago, thanks to modern medicine. Fudge mended rapidly; but we were not really at ease about him until one evening four or five days later. Rosalind was in the kitchen; she called me, and I hurried in.

'Something wonderful has happened,' she cried. 'Look!' —and she pointed to the open door of the larder—'Fudge has stolen some fish!' Seldom has wickedness been rewarded with such general rejoicing.

I suppose that we, like most people, have had our share of illness amongst our animals. To see a sick animal is inexpressibly painful. Their lives are all too short, and there is much that threatens to make them shorter still. No sooner has a cat settled himself into the family and become a member of it in his own right (for kittens, I repeat, win us only by the charm of their generic kittenhood) than the shadow of good-bye is there behind him. One is not always conscious of it; but it's there.

'How long will you last, Mummy?' Lesley gravely enquired of Rosalind many years ago. But behind the questions of children there is no burden of mortality.

I suppose it is because of that shadow, which has darkened since Sixpence was killed, that I cannot help wishing that Fudge would be content with his own garden. There is no cause that I can see which should take him across the road to the deserted garden opposite—but he goes. Fortunately

he looks both ways before he crosses (I have seen him do it) like a well-trained child. But I wish he would not go. Wuzzy, in the old days, was safe from such dangers; for then, as I have said, there was nothing swifter to be met in the lane which passes our front gate than the carrier's cart and, now and then, a bicycle. But the lane is a road now, much widened and smoothed, and the traffic it carries is no different from the traffic elsewhere in our once quiet countryside. Cats are alert and wary creatures; but so are men, and both cats and men can come to grief on a busy road.

It is foolish to fret about what might be. Fudge is wiser; *he* does not fret; he does not care two pins about tomorrow, provided that all is well today. At the moment, however, all is not well—he still misses Sixpence, though it is a month since Sixpence was killed. For the first few days Fudge was desolate, and went looking for him everywhere. Rosalind tried to coax him to play, but he responded with only half a heart; he wanted Sixpence, and missed the old larks and happy battles they had together. He is better now, but not yet his old self—not quite. When we lose a friend, we lose not him only, but his part in our other friends.

It is a golden August morning as I put the last few threads, less brightly coloured than I had hoped they would be, into my small tapestry. Susie is with me in the study; Moira is in the garden; Fudge is still in the kitchen, stretched out along the window-sill, I expect, where he has been since I brought him in for his breakfast. I must let him out. Where will he go, I wonder? If only Sixpence were there too, he would be urging him to some kind of a lark: very likely they would make their way together to the heaps of grass (hay now, and not yet all cleared away) which I cut with a riphook from the banks of the dell—that would be a good place for a lark, though best of all, for

both of them, used to be the dead leaves in autumn, especially while one of us was engaged in sweeping them up on some dry and rustling day. Fudge would plunge into the growing heap and disappear from view, to emerge a moment later with a whirl and scatter, only to vanish again amongst the long grass on the bank under the hedge; and Sixpence would be after him, leaping high into the air to elude his pounce.

But Fudge is staider now. He won't play with Moira, though he enjoys getting a rise out of her now and then and making her spit at him; nor will he play with Susie, as he used to do when he was a kitten, though they remain as good friends as ever.

When I open the back door, he will stand for a moment in the doorway flicking his tail and quivering his nose; then he will lope off along the brick path towards the raspberry canes, and disappear.

Perhaps he will make for a spot he particularly likes under the green spikes of the montbretias and sit there blinking to himself in the sunshine and waiting for whatever may turn up to amuse him—Susie's friend Jock, for instance, the long thin dog with a bushy tail like a fox's, whom he takes great pleasure first in glaring at, and then chasing ignominiously out of the garden. Or perhaps (as he is still, thank goodness, as greedy as ever) he may tire of the garden after an hour or so, and make his way round to the kitchen again, to see if his mistress is getting on nicely with the dinner. In any case, I know that, should I want him, all I need do is to go to the door, call KIT and clap my hands, and he will come. Moreover he will come not as most cats do, with many pauses and hesitations on the way, wondering if it is worth while to come at all; he will come at the gallop, full tilt. Does this surprise you? Well, I admit that I seldom do call Fudge in except for a

particular purpose, such as the wish to have him safe indoors when we are going out—or perhaps just to be sure that he has not crossed the road; and on such occasions we make it worth his while to answer the call—a bite of fish, perhaps, left over from yesterday's supper, or a dash of milk from the top of the bottle. A little stratagem like that does us no harm, and is very pleasant for Fudge.

Next Sunday Rosalind and I are going away for our holiday. Olive, I am glad to say, will be here during our absence, so we shall not have to worry about Fudge or Susie or Moira. All the same, I expect we shall worry a little; but Olive, who understands these things, will send us a postcard now and then just to say that all is well.

COUNTY LIBRARY